

**The Politics of the Linguistic Turn: A Wittgensteinian Analysis and Critique of  
the Role of Language in Contemporary Political Theory**

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### **Declaration of Authorship**

I hereby certify that the following dissertation submitted for the degree of PhD is the sole work of the undersigned.

Signed

Edward C. Fisher

Date 30/9/98



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## Abstract

The thesis investigates the implications flowing from the adoption of certain conceptions of language within contemporary political and social theory. It also examines the impact which this has had upon some of the influential accounts given of concrete political phenomena such as Thatcherism. A chief aim of the study is to re-establish the irreducibly social nature of language, a crucial dimension which, it is argued, has been lost in contemporary poststructuralist and postmodernist formulations of the language/politics relationship.

Section 1 places the central topic of the thesis in context by examining the role which certain dominant generative metaphors from the field of linguistics have played in undermining the notion of language as a truly social and political phenomenon. This involves an examination of the political implications which stem from the poststructuralist and postmodernist appropriations of Saussure's theoretical legacy; in particular, the insistence upon the notion of a language 'system' and upon the 'arbitrary' nature of the relation between the signifier and signified.

In contrast to the poststructuralist and postmodernist views, a Wittgensteinian conception of language is set out in section II which views the latter not in purely semiotic terms as an autonomous and radically indeterminate structure, but as a socially-embedded network of rule-governed linguistic and practical activities; a conception which is encapsulated in Wittgenstein's notion of a 'form of life'. In the course of this, an immanent critique of the poststructuralist/postmodernist conception of language is developed through a focus upon the writings of Lyotard and Rorty, both of whom claim allegiance to a Wittgensteinian perspective, but whose chief failings, it is argued, stem from an unwarranted universalisation of such notions as 'difference', the 'arbitrary' nature of the signifier/signified relation, and the 'contingency' of language. In contrast, a line of argument is developed via the later writings of Wittgenstein that re-establishes the varied and socially embedded uses of language, one of which is to represent states of affairs in the socio-political world. All of this, it is argued, reveals a number of important parallels between a

Wittgensteinian perspective on the language/politics relationship and the views of other writers on the topic such as Aristotle, Marx, and Bourdieu.

In order to defend and deepen the alternative conception of language advanced in section II, section III examines the frequently voiced claim that a Wittgensteinian approach to the socio-political is inherently conservative in outcome. The study counters the central misconceptions involved in the latter interpretation, and develops the basis of an alternative reading of Wittgenstein's later writings by employing some of their frequently ignored conceptual resources. The interpretation offered does not, however, merely accept uncritically Wittgenstein's writings as they stand, but argues, where appropriate, for the necessity of going beyond a Wittgensteinian approach as traditionally conceived. This is achieved by developing and extending the underlying logic of such key Wittgensteinian themes as 'ordinary language', 'grammar' and 'description', and by arguing against the conflation of the concepts of 'language game' and 'form of life'.

The significance of the issues pursued for our understanding of the role of language in concrete political developments is highlighted in section IV, which provides a Wittgensteinian account of the failure of Thatcherism as a 'hegemonic project'. The section concentrates upon some weaknesses in Hall's influential analysis and traces these to an underlying conception of language drawn from the writings of Laclau and Mouffe. In this way the study attempts to bring together and to illustrate within the area of a single case study the theoretical and political dimensions of the linguistic turn which have been pursued throughout the thesis.

In conclusion, it is argued that the linguistic turn as conceived and theorised from a Wittgensteinian - as opposed to a poststructuralist or postmodernist perspective - is also a turn towards a more adequate recognition of the irreducibly social and political nature of language.



## Introduction

The present study examines the politics of the 'linguistic turn'. In particular, the thesis investigates the implications flowing from the adoption of certain conceptions of language within contemporary political and social theory. It is argued that such conceptions or 'pictures' of language have had an important impact on some of the influential accounts given of concrete political phenomena such as Thatcherism. A chief aim of the study is to re-establish the irreducibly social nature of language, a crucial dimension which, it is argued, has been lost in contemporary poststructuralist and postmodernist formulations of the language/politics relationship.

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However, it should be noted that not all poststructuralist and postmodernist theorists explicitly acknowledge the influence of Saussure's writings. Nevertheless, even those who do not can often be shown to subscribe to the Saussurean paradigm if not to the specific writings themselves i.e., to a view of language as an essentially semiotic system of differential relations between signifiers rather than a truly social phenomenon. Similarly, not all of those theorists who might be considered 'poststructuralist' are treated in the study. The most obvious example of this type of omission is Foucault who, although mentioned occasionally, is not treated in any depth. This is chiefly because I do not consider Foucault's treatment of language to generate the same problems as certain other theorists. In particular, Foucault is not classifiable as a 'linguistic idealist' in the sense developed below. Briefly, Foucault, unlike those theorists influenced by the Saussurean paradigm, has a keenly developed

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sense of language as a social phenomenon inextricably linked with inequalities of power. An equally important reason for the omission of any large-scale treatment of Foucault is the fact that he does not claim Wittgenstein's later writings for poststructuralism or postmodernism, as do theorists such as Rorty, Lyotard, Laclau and Mouffe.

In contrast to the poststructuralist and postmodernist views, a Wittgensteinian conception of language is set out in section III which views the latter not in purely semiotic terms as an autonomous and radically indeterminate structure, but as a socially-embedded network of rule-governed linguistic and practical activities; a conception encapsulated in Wittgenstein's notion of a 'form of life'. In the course of this, an immanent critique of the poststructuralist/postmodernist conception of language is developed through a focus on the writings of Lyotard and Rorty, both of whom claim allegiance to a Wittgensteinian perspective, but whose chief failings, it is argued, stem from an unwarranted universalisation of such notions as 'difference', the 'arbitrary' nature of the signifier/signified relation, and the 'contingency' of language.

A central theme of the study is that Wittgenstein's writings are significant because they stress the importance of language conceived not merely as some form of neutral, unproblematic medium; but as something which is to a certain extent 'constitutive' of the sphere of the socio-political. For this reason Wittgenstein's writings are generally considered to be at the forefront of the 'linguistic turn'. However, as the study argues, there is a second reason why Wittgenstein's writings are important. These writings represent not only an enunciation and development of some of the key themes of the linguistic turn, for example, the view that language is not simply an unproblematic medium, but they also constitute a forceful and sustained critique of those writers and theorists who have effectively transformed the linguistic *turn* into a form of linguistic reductionism with all that this entails in socio-political terms.

In contrast, a line of argument is developed via the later writings of Wittgenstein that re-establishes the varied and socially-embedded uses of language, one of which is to represent states of affairs in the socio-political world. All of this, it is argued, reveals a number of important parallels between a Wittgensteinian perspective on the

language/politics relationship and the views of other writers on the topic such as Aristotle, Marx, and Bourdieu. Wittgenstein's writings thus connect with an important tradition which has theorised the language/politics relationship in a socially holistic and non-reductionist manner. In contrast to a good deal of poststructuralist and postmodernist writing, what has been retained and underlined by this tradition is the social nature and political significance of language. There is then an alternative version of the linguistic turn. It is a version that views language contextually as an irreducibly social phenomenon and thus restores the links erased by poststructuralism and postmodernism between language and concrete social practices and relations of power.

There are, of course, a number of commentators, perhaps most notably Ernest Gellner (1979), who strongly criticise what they regard as the contemporary infatuation with language and 'linguistic analysis' in particular. Thus, according to Gellner: "The implications of Linguistic Philosophy for politics can be described as either neutralist, or conservative, or irrationalist...To specify the general rules of the game describable as 'political thinking' is not to take sides in it or to make moves within it: to specify the rules of chess is not to play chess"(1979:245). However, as the study argues, the critique of a Wittgensteinian approach by Gellner and others rests on a set of mistaken assumptions concerning the nature of the relationship between politics and language. In particular, Gellner, along with others such as Marcuse (1964) underestimates the political significance which flows from an adequate understanding of 'ordinary language analysis'.

In order to defend and deepen the alternative conception of language advanced in section II, section III examines the frequently voiced claim that a Wittgensteinian approach to the socio-political is inherently conservative in outcome. The study counters the central misconceptions involved in the latter interpretation, and develops the basis of an alternative reading of Wittgenstein's later writings by employing some of their frequently ignored conceptual resources. Through a re-examination of some key concepts of the later writings section III of the study sets out to develop an alternative non-conservative reading of the socio-political relevance of a Wittgensteinian approach. In particular, the study argues for a greater

acknowledgement of the existence of a 'saying/showing' distinction in Wittgenstein's later writings, and of the role it plays in undercutting the conservative interpretation of a Wittgensteinian approach. The conventional understanding of the Wittgensteinian concept of 'ordinary language' is questioned through an illustration of its inconsistency with a number of other key concepts such as 'family resemblance', and the Wittgensteinian critique of the demand for determinacy of sense. In a further demonstration of their critical dimension this is tied in with an exploration of the theoretical resources which exist in Wittgenstein's later writings and which might serve as the basis of a form of immanent critique. The last part of section III brings these threads together through an examination of the political implications of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*.

The particular interpretation offered does not, however, merely accept uncritically Wittgenstein's writings as they stand, but argues, where appropriate, for the necessity of going beyond a Wittgensteinian approach as traditionally conceived. This is achieved by developing and extending the underlying logic of such key Wittgensteinian themes as 'ordinary language', 'grammar' and 'description', and by arguing against the conflation of the concepts of 'language-game' and 'form of life'.

The significance of the issues pursued for our understanding of the role of language in concrete political developments is highlighted in section IV, which provides a Wittgensteinian account of the failure of Thatcherism as a 'hegemonic project'. In particular, the section concentrates on some weaknesses in Hall's influential analysis and traces these to an underlying conception of language drawn from the writings of Laclau and Mouffe. Section IV thus attempts to bring together and to illustrate within the area of a single case study the theoretical and political dimensions of the linguistic turn which have been pursued throughout the thesis. The point is to underline the practical political consequences which flow from the acceptance, explicit or otherwise, of a particular conception of language which itself stems from a particular reading of the linguistic turn. Hall's analysis of Thatcherism is chosen as a case study because of the recognition which it awards to language or discourse as a force in political life. In this sense it is a concrete representation of the

politics of the linguistic turn – of theory played out on the stage of contemporary politics.

Equally importantly, Hall's analysis is chosen because it represents a failure to draw the appropriate theoretical and political conclusions from language conceived as a socially-embedded phenomenon. The writings of Wittgenstein are employed in order to explain why it is that Hall's analysis is ultimately unsuccessful, and to indicate the alternative conception of language required for a more adequate understanding of the kind of 'hegemonic politics' represented by Thatcherism.

The study as a whole argues for a rethink of the linguistic turn from a Wittgensteinian perspective. What this provides, firstly, is an antidote to the shortcomings of a 'positivist' conception of language as a merely representational medium. Secondly, and more importantly, it functions as a critique of the linguistic idealism inherent in many poststructuralist and postmodernist formulations of the linguistic turn. A rethink of the linguistic turn based on the later writings of Wittgenstein offers an alternative to the influence currently exerted on much of our social and political thought by the aforementioned schools of thought which are united by a shared conception of language traceable to the Saussurean paradigm. In conclusion, it is argued that the linguistic turn as conceived and theorised from a Wittgensteinian - as opposed to a poststructuralist or postmodernist perspective - is also a turn towards a more adequate recognition of the irreducibly social and political nature of language.

## Section 1

### The Philosophical and Political Context of the Linguistic Turn



## Chapter 1

### **Signs in Support of 'The System': The Political Legacy of Saussurean Linguistics**

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The current orthodoxy concerning the supposedly inevitable undermining of the 'mirror' conception of language has had important repercussions within the socio-political sphere of thought. As the writings of poststructuralism and postmodernism illustrate, a new and competing conception or paradigm of language has become established. This chapter investigates the philosophical roots of this paradigm in the writings of Saussure.

To understand the contemporary conception of the language/politics relationship we need to understand one of the key formative influences upon the development of poststructuralist and postmodern thought, namely, the writings of Saussure. It is argued that certain dominant generative metaphors or models of language which have emerged from the field of linguistics have been crucial in determining the nature and political consequences of contemporary formulations of the linguistic turn as represented in some key areas of poststructuralist and postmodern thought. To illustrate the point, we examine the apolitical and ahistorical implications stemming from the poststructuralist and postmodernist appropriations of a key generative metaphor represented by Saussure's insistence on the notion of a language 'system' and on the allegedly 'arbitrary' nature of the relation between the signifier and signified. The consequent devaluing of the historical and political dimension of language as a system properly conceived, i.e., as an irreducibly social phenomenon, and of the nature and extent of the interaction between linguistic change and politics is discussed, as are the political dimensions which are evident in the conservatism implied by the Saussurean paradigm which awards explanatory primacy to the synchronic over the diachronic.



## Introduction

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However, it should be noted that not all poststructuralist and postmodernist theorists explicitly acknowledge the influence of Saussure's writings. Nevertheless, even those who do not can often be shown to subscribe to the Saussurean paradigm if not to the specific writings themselves i.e., to a view of language as an essentially semiotic system of differential relations between signifiers rather than a truly social phenomenon. Similarly, not all of those theorists who might be considered 'poststructuralist' are treated in the study. The most obvious example of this type of omission is Foucault who, although mentioned occasionally, is not treated in any depth. This is chiefly because I do not consider Foucault's treatment of language to generate the same problems as certain other theorists. In particular, Foucault is not classifiable as a 'linguistic idealist' in the sense developed below. Briefly, Foucault, unlike those theorists influenced by the Saussurean paradigm, has a keenly developed

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In contrast, a line of argument is developed via the later writings of Wittgenstein that re-establishes the varied and socially-embedded uses of language, one of which is to represent states of affairs in the socio-political world. All of this, it is argued, reveals a number of important parallels between a Wittgensteinian perspective on the

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In order to defend and deepen the alternative conception of language advanced in section II, section III examines the frequently voiced claim that a Wittgensteinian approach to the socio-political is inherently conservative in outcome. The study counters the central misconceptions involved in the latter interpretation, and develops the basis of an alternative reading of Wittgenstein's later writings by employing some of their frequently ignored conceptual resources. Through a re-examination of some key concepts of the later writings section III of the study sets out to develop an alternative non-conservative reading of the socio-political relevance of a Wittgensteinian approach. In particular, the study argues for a greater

acknowledgement of the existence of a 'saying/showing' distinction in Wittgenstein's later writings, and of the role it plays in undercutting the conservative interpretation of a Wittgensteinian approach. The conventional understanding of the Wittgensteinian concept of 'ordinary language' is questioned through an illustration of its inconsistency with a number of other key concepts such as 'family resemblance', and the Wittgensteinian critique of the demand for determinacy of sense. In a further demonstration of their critical dimension this is tied in with an exploration of the theoretical resources which exist in Wittgenstein's later writings and which might serve as the basis of a form of immanent critique. The last part of section III brings these threads together through an examination of the political implications of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*.

The particular interpretation offered does not, however, merely accept uncritically Wittgenstein's writings as they stand, but argues, where appropriate, for the necessity of going beyond a Wittgensteinian approach as traditionally conceived. This is achieved by developing and extending the underlying logic of such key Wittgensteinian themes as 'ordinary language', 'grammar' and 'description', and by arguing against the conflation of the concepts of 'language-game' and 'form of life'.

The significance of the issues pursued for our understanding of the role of language in concrete political developments is highlighted in section IV, which provides a Wittgensteinian account of the failure of Thatcherism as a 'hegemonic project'. In particular, the section concentrates on some weaknesses in Hall's influential analysis and traces these to an underlying conception of language drawn from the writings of Laclau and Mouffe. Section IV thus attempts to bring together and to illustrate within the area of a single case study the theoretical and political dimensions of the linguistic turn which have been pursued throughout the thesis. The point is to underline the practical political consequences which flow from the acceptance, explicit or otherwise, of a particular conception of language which itself stems from a particular reading of the linguistic turn. Hall's analysis of Thatcherism is chosen as a case study because of the recognition which it awards to language or discourse as a force in political life. In this sense it is a concrete representation of the

politics of the linguistic turn – of theory played out on the stage of contemporary politics.

Equally importantly, Hall's analysis is chosen because it represents a failure to draw the appropriate theoretical and political conclusions from language conceived as a socially-embedded phenomenon. The writings of Wittgenstein are employed in order to explain why it is that Hall's analysis is ultimately unsuccessful, and to indicate the alternative conception of language required for a more adequate understanding of the kind of 'hegemonic politics' represented by Thatcherism.

The study as a whole argues for a rethink of the linguistic turn from a Wittgensteinian perspective. What this provides, firstly, is an antidote to the shortcomings of a 'positivist' conception of language as a merely representational medium. Secondly, and more importantly, it functions as a critique of the linguistic idealism inherent in many poststructuralist and postmodernist formulations of the linguistic turn. A rethink of the linguistic turn based on the later writings of Wittgenstein offers an alternative to the influence currently exerted on much of our social and political thought by the aforementioned schools of thought which are united by a shared conception of language traceable to the Saussurean paradigm. In conclusion, it is argued that the linguistic turn as conceived and theorised from a Wittgensteinian - as opposed to a poststructuralist or postmodernist perspective - is also a turn towards a more adequate recognition of the irreducibly social and political nature of language.

## Section 1

### **The Philosophical and Political Context of the Linguistic Turn**

## Chapter 1

### **Signs in Support of ‘The System’: The Political Legacy of Saussurean Linguistics**

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The current orthodoxy concerning the supposedly inevitable undermining of the ‘mirror’ conception of language has had important repercussions within the socio-political sphere of thought. As the writings of poststructuralism and postmodernism illustrate, a new and competing conception or paradigm of language has become established. This chapter investigates the philosophical roots of this paradigm in the writings of Saussure.

To understand the contemporary conception of the language/politics relationship we need to understand one of the key formative influences upon the development of poststructuralist and postmodern thought, namely, the writings of Saussure. It is argued that certain dominant generative metaphors or models of language which have emerged from the field of linguistics have been crucial in determining the nature and political consequences of contemporary formulations of the linguistic turn as represented in some key areas of poststructuralist and postmodern thought. To illustrate the point, we examine the apolitical and ahistorical implications stemming from the poststructuralist and postmodernist appropriations of a key generative metaphor represented by Saussure’s insistence on the notion of a language ‘system’ and on the allegedly ‘arbitrary’ nature of the relation between the signifier and signified. The consequent devaluing of the historical and political dimension of language as a system properly conceived, i.e., as an irreducibly social phenomenon, and of the nature and extent of the interaction between linguistic change and politics is discussed, as are the political dimensions which are evident in the conservatism implied by the Saussurean paradigm which awards explanatory primacy to the synchronic over the diachronic.



Before exploring the main themes of the section a number of points require emphasis. These concern, in particular, the reasons behind the adoption within the study of a Wittgensteinian perspective on language. As suggested in the introduction, it represents a valuable immanent critique of the poststructuralist /postmodernist conception of language.

### 1.1 *A 'Picture' of Language: The Legacy of Saussure*

The central theme of this study is the political significance of language, in particular, the impact which particular conceptions of the nature of language has had on contemporary social and political thought. As suggested, the writings of Saussure have played a key role in this process. There is, however, an important sense in which it is somewhat misleading to speak of the 'legacy of Saussure'. In particular, there is a need to keep in mind a conception of the influence of generative metaphor as a cumulative and historical process. For this reason, Saussure's thought is set in historical context to illustrate that there was nothing inevitable about the particular appropriation of his writings by poststructuralist and postmodernist theorists. Rather, as is argued in sub-section 1.2, the particular historical and political conjuncture of the post-1968 era provided the context for the radicalization of Saussure's writings.

Many of the key themes which appear in Saussure's writings are ones which recur throughout the history of linguistic thought. Consider, for example, the typically Saussurean 'systemic' conception of human language. As Merquior points out: "without ignoring the value of [Saussure's] theoretical breakthrough, we begin to realize that in more than one respect he was a developer rather than the author of certain decisive insights into the nature of language. He stands at the apex of a long chain of philosophical thinking on language which, from Locke and Condillac to Humboldt and Taine, firmly denied that language could be conceived of as just a nomenclature. This stance as a harbinger of the systemic view of language, foreshadowed the great achievement of Saussure"(1986:11).

Thus, to adapt slightly one of the key terms of Derridean deconstruction, it becomes possible to speak of the existence of a strong 'trace' running throughout the history of linguistic thought prior to Saussure, and which finds expression in the



notion of language as a 'system'. In addition, Hans Aarsleff (1982:356-371) has pointed to the existence of what were later to become some of the key Saussurean concepts within the writings of Hippolyte Taine. In particular, the distinction between signified and signifier, Aarsleff notes, is found in Taine's (1870) *Treatise De l' Intelligence*. As Merquior also notes: "Saussure did not at all assert the arbitrariness thesis as a novelty...from the scholastics to Hobbes and Locke, authors continued to regard the linguistic sign as an arbitrary institution, but *instead of concentrating on this they became more interested in explaining how such institutions were brought about*"(1986:12, emphasis added). My italics are intended to highlight what the perspective of poststructuralism together with that of postmodernism has lost i.e., a focus on the social and hence ultimately political basis of meaning. This, it is argued throughout the present study, is one of the central and most important emphases which the orientation underlying a Wittgensteinian perspective on language is capable of supplying.

In discussing the question of Saussure's legacy there are in addition a number of potentially complicating factors which we should note. Firstly, Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* was, like Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (PI), published posthumously, having been compiled from the lecture notes of some of Saussure's students (See Culler, 1976:34).<sup>1</sup> As a consequence, a certain amount of controversy inevitably surrounds the question of the authenticity of the *Course* and, in particular, the extent to which the emphasis laid on certain key themes, should be considered solely as Saussure's work.

Strozier, for example, is undoubtedly correct in insisting that "the...important question is whether the *Cours* authorizes this conception of history as a succession of synchronic states..."(1988:128). Nevertheless, our discussion is concerned with the importance of a consideration of the constitutive dimension of language, in particular the role of the generative metaphor of a 'linguistic system'. We are concerned, in other words, with the degree to which metaphors which invite conceptions of language as a 'system' etc., underlie not only the process of linguistic theory formation itself, but the way in which we typically come to think about political and social phenomena in general.

On a more technical note, the question of the attribution of philosophical or theoretical influence to Saussure's writings alone also becomes problematic when we look, for example, at one of the key concepts - the notion of the 'arbitrary' nature of the linguistic sign. Here again the tradition of linguistic thought is important. As Williams (1977:37) and Merquior (1986:12) have illustrated, there exists a long line of philosophical predecessors for whom the notion of language as 'arbitrary' was considered a commonplace.<sup>2</sup> The existence of this type of theoretical tradition among other factors undoubtedly facilitated a particular appropriation of Saussure's writings which in turn helped to bolster a conception of language as an asocial, ahistorical and autonomous 'system'.

We need to be cautious, therefore, in attributing, at least to Saussure writings alone, the apolitical and ahistorical implications which, it will be argued throughout the present study, stem from the poststructuralist and postmodernist appropriations of his theoretical legacy. Not least because the theoretical dichotomies postulated in Saussure's writings actually point towards an appreciation, albeit attenuated, of the social and political basis of meaning. This becomes evident if we consider, for example, one of the fundamental elements of the Saussurean theoretical system, namely, the insistence on the 'arbitrary' nature of the relation between the signifier and signified. As Mayfield points out: "Theorizing the 'arbitrary' relation between the sign and signified directs the problem of language precisely onto the political terrain of power and social domination, freeing our analyses of reference...from epistemological considerations of truth and falsehood"(1991:357).

The essential political point underlying such observations is that Saussure's writings can, on one level, disabuse us of what Aarsleff (1982:25-26) has termed our 'Adamic' conceptions of language - i.e., the notion that as the only living creatures who use language we are, therefore, closer to God; and that as a corollary the meaning and reference of words have been divinely ordained - and, hence, encourage us to focus on the secular and contingent basis of language. In this way it is possible that a form of political realisation or consciousness-raising can follow from an apparently abstract exercise in linguistic theorisation as we come to see, as Mayfield

puts it, that: "The coupling of the sign and the signified is forged by a power external to both"(1991:357).

The line of thought underlying Mayfield's article is thus useful in limiting some of the criticisms which have often been levelled at the writings of Saussure; in particular, the charge that these *inevitably* foster an apoliticism and ahistoricism, a process that reaches its apogee in the postmodern and deconstructionist critiques of the traditional conception of language as a more or less stable system of meaning and extra-linguistic reference. A couple of points are worth noting here. Firstly, the apparently highly abstract and asocial nature of Saussure's writings requires to be seen in the context of a reaction to the then dominant conception of language.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, as Mayfield's discussion suggests, despite the necessarily abstract and theoretical nature of Saussurean linguistics, there is nevertheless an implicitly socio-political dimension to the writings which emerges from a consideration of the logical implications of Saussure's discussion of the relation between signifier and signified.

Thirdly, as commentators such as Merquior (1986) and Culler (1976) have pointed out, the very nature of the subject-matter, i.e., human language, is one which to a large extent effectively dictates the methodological approach adopted by the linguist. As Merquior notes, it is a fact that "...linguistic objects in general allow, far better than other social phenomena, an abstraction - for the purposes of analysis - from their diachronic or historical dimension"(1986:10-11). Culler, likewise, helps us to view the claims of Saussurean linguistics, in particular those concerning the priority of the synchronic over the diachronic, in their proper perspective. As he points out: "In a sense, the notion of a synchronic state is a methodological fiction"(1976:37). It is, however, a necessary methodological fiction. As Saussure himself points out: "In separating *langue* from *parole* we are separating what is social from what is individual and what is essential from what is ancillary or accidental"(Course, p.14, quoted in Culler, 1976:30-31).

Furthermore, and despite the nature and consequences of the postmodern appropriation of his writings, it would be accurate to say that Saussure's linguistic theory, properly conceived, is in fact agnostic concerning the relationship between language and reality. As Merquior points out, Saussure "did not distinguish between

signified (the 'concept' of the signifier) and reference in order to talk about, let alone grapple with the latter. Rather, he wanted to circumscribe the area of linguistic theory regardless of the theory problems of general epistemology"(1986:230-231).

Nevertheless, the subsequent failure to note Saussure's effective bracketing of the question of epistemology has often led to a misunderstanding of his theory and consequently to the unwarranted drawing of certain political conclusions concerning his writings; namely, that they were, somehow, 'ideologically inspired' (Eagleton, 1983, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. p.110, quoted in Strozier, 1988:127-8). However, in the *Course* Saussure is concerned above all with semiotics as opposed to semantics. In other words, Saussure's relational conception of meaning is one which, as Sturrock notes, is premised on a concern with *how* signs mean, rather than *what* they mean (1986:22). Thus while semantics is concerned with the signifiatory and referential dimension of signs, i.e., their links to extra-linguistic objects and states-of-affairs, semiotics focuses on the 'value' which a particular sign has in relation to the other signs within the linguistic system. As Saussure writes: "in all cases, then, we discover not ideas given in advance but values emanating from the system. When we say that these values correspond to concepts, it is understood that these concepts are purely differential, not positively defined by their content but negatively defined by their relations with other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is that they are what the others are not"(1974:117).

Emile Benveniste also expresses the semiotic/semantic distinction in a way which helps to bring out what are often perceived to be the epistemological (and hence ultimately political) implications of Saussurean linguistics. "In Semantics", Benveniste notes, "'meaning'...opens out on to the world. Whereas in semiotics meaning is turned in on itself and as it were contained within itself". (Benveniste, *Problèmes de Linguistique Générale*, Tome 1 p.94, quoted in Sturrock, 1986:22).

For these reasons the Saussurean paradigm, with its focus on semiotics combined with the insistence on the explanatory primacy of the synchronic dimension, frequently gives rise to charges that the theory treats language in a thoroughly ahistoric and asocial manner. As Jameson argues: "the very point of departure of Structuralism - the primacy of the linguistic model - ...is no less arbitrary for being

unique, and the systems of thought which emerge from it will not themselves be exempt from some eventual, problematical, and painful reexamination of their own enabling premise”(1974:vii). On this view, shared by critics such as Palmer (1990), the particular nature of the linguistic subject-matter and the methodological constraints which this imposed was merely a factor, albeit an important one, which facilitated the ‘descent into discourse’ and its accompanying political consequences. Consequently, we should not allow the valuable points which Mayfield's article raises to obscure the fact that Saussure's writings do nevertheless display (albeit for valid methodological reasons) a systematic privileging of the synchronic over the diachronic. Saussure, for example, is insistent on the fact that diachronic, i.e., historical linguistic changes, have little effect on the system (*langue*). A crucial consequence of the influence of the Saussurean paradigm has been a downplaying of the historical and political dimensions of language. In some of the writings of poststructuralism and postmodernism language is viewed merely as a semiotic system, rather than a socially-embedded phenomenon. What is lost is an appreciation of the nature and extent of the interaction between language and the network of social practices and power relations with which it is inextricably linked.

Again, and no doubt with the writings of Levi-Strauss in mind, Strozier has argues that: “Saussure, because of his perceived emphasis on synchronics, is in part responsible for a structuralism which is often totally ahistorical”(1988:123).<sup>4</sup> As Merquior points out: “Today the single notion most generally credited to Saussure is the idea of the arbitrariness of the sign: the independence of linguistic signs from non-verbal reality. The concept of the arbitrary sign is something of which structuralism has made heavy, and indeed heavily ideological, use”(1986:12).

Nevertheless, defenders of Saussure might be justified in pointing to the peculiar power of nomenclature in influencing the interpretation and reception of particular theories. As Raymond Williams notes, in the case of structuralism “the problem of naming turned out to be crucial”(1988:303). It is worth quoting the relevant passage from Williams in full, for it brings out the importance of generative metaphor. As he writes: “It is clear that in many cases the hypothesis of a structure, followed by its detailed analysis, has been very fruitful in investigation. It can encourage clarification

of fundamental relationships, often of a kind screened by assumption or habit. This has given great strength to structuralism as an emphasis, but the transition represented by one aspect of the transfer from structure to structuralism - the sense not of a procedure or set of procedures but of an explanatory system - has had quite different effects. There has been an evident tendency to take the categories of thought and analysis as if they were prime substances. It is here, especially, that structuralism joins with particular tendencies in psychology (when Id, Ego, Superego, Libido or Death-Wish function as primary characters, which actual human beings perform in already structured ways) and in Marxism (where classes or modes of production are primary, and human beings live out their inherent properties)"(1983:305).

The metaphor of the 'system' generates the conception of a stable, overarching linguistic structure, effectively isolated from the influence of the historico-political and consequently undermining radically the concept of human agency. The writings of Mueller (1973), for example, reflect the Saussurean insistence on the notion of a pregiven system in which the individual speaker finds herself subordinated within a pregiven and inherited linguistic system. Thus according to Mueller: "Language is a repository of cultural tradition, and changes the individual makes in his language are minimal..."(1973:15). Mueller, along with Foucault, arguably overemphasises the deterministic implications flowing from the, ultimately Saussurean conception, that 'language uses individuals', rather than vice versa.

### *1.2 The Social as Semiotic: Contextual Factors in the Emergence of Poststructuralist and Postmodernist Thought*

As suggested at the beginning of the previous section, the notion of 'context' understood in concrete socio-political terms is a crucial one in understanding the process of generative metaphor reception and appropriation. This can be seen, for example, if we briefly consider in some more detail the particular social, economic, and political circumstances, which constituted the wider context within which the poststructuralist and postmodern conception of language emerged. This is something which a number of commentators have focused on in attempting to account for the development of postmodern thought in general (See, e.g., Palmer (1990), Callinicos



(1990), Jameson (1974)). It is important to emphasise why we are looking at Saussure's writings and considering them in their intellectual and socio-political context. For to do otherwise would be to subscribe to a form of linguistic idealism i.e., to the idea that language is a self-referential and asocial system. The rise and influence of the Saussurean paradigm, like the linguistic turn in general, requires to be contextualised in order to be properly understood; otherwise we are left with the image of a mere unfolding of linguistic thought as self-contained and evolving in isolation from the socio-political.

For this reason we need to look at the background which governed or conditioned the reception and ultimate radicalisation of the writings of Saussure, in particular, those socio-economic and political conditions of the period concerned (roughly from the late 60s onwards) proved congenial to the reception of the conception of language generated by the writings of Saussure. As already indicated, the point has received a degree of consideration in the secondary literature. For example, Jameson (1974) has provided a useful focus on the wider socio-political context within which the reception and appropriation of the Saussurean conception of language has taken place. As Jameson argues: "The deeper justification for the use of the model or metaphor must, I think, be sought elsewhere, outside the claims and counterclaims for scientific validity or technological progress. It lies in the concrete character of the social life of the so-called advanced countries today, which offer the spectacle of a world from which nature as such has been eliminated, a world saturated with messages and information, whose intricate commodity network may be seen as the very prototype of a system of signs. There is therefore a profound consonance between linguistics as a method and that systematized and disembodied nightmare which is our culture today"(1974:viii-ix).

Thus, while he does not explicitly refer or subscribe in detail to the Schonian thesis of generative metaphor, Jameson nevertheless offers a valuably corrective historical-materialist explanation which ties the influence and appropriation of the Saussurean paradigm to concrete social and political developments. It is an analysis which also prefigures his later account (see Jameson, 1984) of the emergence of postmodernism itself as a 'movement' which, in its radical critique of traditional conceptions of

language, clearly owes much to Saussurean linguistics. It is valuable because it emphasises the need to view the rise of poststructuralism and postmodernism in context.

In a similar manner, but with particular reference to the postmodernism of Baudrillard, Norris argues that: "Here again, it is the Saussurean paradigm - or a form of structural-linguistic *a priori* - that stands behind Baudrillard's wholesale reduction of economic, political and social issues to questions of symbolic exchange and the 'dissimulating' agency of the sign...Baudrillard transforms Saussure's descriptive-analytical project into a form of wholesale anti-realist doctrine"(1990:188). Norris's point underlines the radicalisation of Saussure's writings by certain poststructuralist and postmodernist theorists and the fact that this was no natural or inevitable development. What Saussure's writings advance is a methodological dictum rather than a global critique of the notion of language as representational.

There is, however, at least one problem facing any attempt to combine what might be termed the Jamesonian analysis of socio-political context with the theory of generative metaphor. As Schon's choice of terminology indicates, metaphor in the thesis is to be conceived of in productive, as opposed to merely reflective, terms. In other words, it is not, as Jameson's otherwise valuable analysis might tend to suggest, simply the epiphenomenal by-product of an objective set of pre-existing socio-economic conditions. The difficulty here, as Ryan notes, is the idea: "that culture can still be directly expressive of economic phenomena, an example, in other words, of the theory of representation that is under critique in postmodernism"(1988:560). Rather, the generative metaphors which we find in the writings of Saussure and those of Chomsky the particular conception of language which they convey are, in a number of important ways, partially constitutive of those conditions, in the sense that they are capable of structuring, influencing, and organising our perceptions of them. Nevertheless, as we shall see in the following section, a Jamesonian contextual analysis of the conditions of reception of the Saussurean and Chomskyan paradigms, suitably amended in the light of the foregoing remarks, can serve as a valuable corrective to the essentially semiotic notion of 'context' which we encounter in the majority of poststructuralist and postmodernist writings.



The previous sections of this study have attempted to illustrate something of the process whereby language comes increasingly to be viewed as indeterminate and non-referential. This, it is argued, follows from the explicit or implicit adoption of the Saussurean paradigm which views language as a synchronic system of signifiers. In the case of theorists such as Derrida, for example, we encounter a form of radicalised Saussureanism in which referentiality comes to be construed purely in terms of a linguistic context in which signifiers refer to others in an endless play. This, as we have seen, is in spite of the fact that Saussure allows a theoretical role, although strictly delimited, to the diachronic or historical dimension of language. This lends credence to the explanatory potential of Schon's concept of generative metaphor. The fact that particular aspects of the Saussurean or Chomskyan linguistic paradigms should be selected and highlighted by later theorists rather than others is consistent with, and explainable in terms of, the selectively heuristic nature of metaphor. What we are dealing with is a relationship operative in both directions, i.e., one which generates a particular conception of language which in turn functions as a perceptual grid or refracting prism through which the socio-political is viewed. As suggested above, evidence for such a view comes from the writings of Schon (1979) and Reddy (1979) on the role of generative metaphor. Schon's analysis of the role of generative metaphor in the sphere of social policy can fruitfully be applied to a study of the impact of the Saussurean paradigm within the contemporary sphere of social and political thought. As Schon argues, the point: "is not that we *ought* to think metaphorically about...problems, but that we do already think about them in terms of certain pervasive, tacit generative metaphors; and that we ought to become critically aware of these generative metaphors, to increase the rigor [sic] and precision of our analysis of...the actual problematic situations that confront us"(1979:256).

The anti-realist conception of language found in the majority of poststructuralist and postmodernist writings is one engendered by certain dominant generative metaphors concerning the alleged nature and structure of language itself - most notably the Saussurean model which awards explanatory primacy to the notion of a linguistic 'system' conceived synchronically. Through the selective focus they

encourage such metaphors succeed in bracketing the inextricable links between the sphere of the socio-political and language. On the positive side, of course, what resulted was, from the point of view of the development of the field of linguistics, a new, heuristically fruitful, and intellectually appealing conception of 'context' as applied to language.

However, the notion of context which emerged in this process was also, inevitably, a highly abstract and asocial conception: one which regarded as theoretically irrelevant to the explanation of language a whole range of social constraints and conditions which only become important when one begins to focus on human linguistic performance, as opposed to competence; and on *parole* as opposed to *langue*. This 'linguistified' notion of 'context' finds both its fullest development and its most acutely stressed internal contradiction - the self-referential nature of its critique - in the poststructuralist and postmodernist conception of language as an infinite play of signification.

The analyses of commentators such as Vološinov (1973:58ff), Eagleton (1983:110), Williams (1977:27-43), Palmer (1990:14ff), and Norris (1990:186), are representative of those who claim to detect the postmodern 'rot' setting in with the writings of Saussure. Characteristic of the first group of commentators who detect the problem as lying with Saussure's writings *per se*, Eagleton has posited an explicit link between Saussurean linguistics and ideology. Thus according to Eagleton: "Behind this linguistic model lies a definite view of human society: change is disturbance and disequilibrium in an essentially conflict-free system, which will stagger for a moment, regain its balance and take the change in its stride"(quoted in Strozier, 1988:127-8).

Again, while none explicitly cite the process of generative metaphor, it is nevertheless held that the key Saussurean conception of language as a system (*langue*), combined with the dichotomy between synchrony and diachrony (the former, of course, being privileged), and the insistence on the arbitrary nature of the sign, laid the theoretical foundations for the slide into an ahistorical, apolitical postmodernism in which language becomes irrevocably detached from any referential anchorage in socio-political reality. On the other side, and in line with the view of the

present study, Merquior (1986:10ff) argues strenuously against the notion that Saussure's writings in themselves provide the theoretical or textual warrant for the later uses which have been made of them by such theorists. This is precisely where, I would argue, the previously noted historical and political conditions of the reception and appropriation of those writings becomes of crucial significance.

As suggested, the central generative metaphors of the Saussurean corpus are found in such key notions as the arbitrary nature of the sign; the synchronic/diachronic dichotomy; and in the notion of a system of language (*langue*) etc. Through the problem-setting or 'framing' role which such metaphors are capable of playing (see Schon, 1979) these features of Saussure's writings have furnished the theoretical basis for a number of the radical postmodern and deconstructionist critiques of language.

The process underlying the perception and reception of generative metaphor is undoubtedly a complex one mediated by various psychological and social factors. However, our understanding of the role of metaphor in human cognition suggests the process is a partial and selective one, in which, as already noted, the nature and content of the metaphor concerned encourages a focusing on particular aspects of a phenomenon rather than others.<sup>5</sup> However, to attribute all of the formative or persuasive influence to language *per se* would be one-sided and implausible.

A central critical theme of the study is that contemporary formulations of the linguistic turn as expressed in some key poststructuralist and postmodernist writings fail to appreciate the socially-situated nature of language. As already stated, the same line of thought should therefore govern our approach to the issue of the influence of Saussure's writings. Reflection on the social nature of language combined with a recognition of the uneven reception and appropriation of particular metaphors suggests, therefore, that the notion of 'context' is crucial in determining how generative metaphors are received and which particular elements are focused on.

If, as already argued in the previous, we should construe the notion of 'context', not merely in a strictly semiotic or narrowly linguistic sense, but in broader socio-political terms, then it becomes possible to incorporate the analyses of Jameson (1984) and Callinicos (1989b; 1990) concerning the developmental conditions, both

intellectual and socio-political, which helped foster the emergence of poststructuralist and postmodern thought. In this way, the late twentieth-century socio-political context with its changing patterns of production and exchange and the explosion of the informational and semiotic spheres can be seen as an ideal one for the reception and selective appropriation of such powerful Saussurean metaphors as those concerning the 'arbitrary sign', and the autonomous 'linguistic system' etc.

### 1.3 *The Radicalisation of Saussure*

The chief element within the Derridean appropriation of Saussure undoubtedly concerns the concept of *differance*. For Derrida, the revolutionary deconstructive potential of this notion is implicit in Saussure's writings but its implications remain undeveloped. As Merquior notes, in Derrida's view this notion of difference "deserves a full-blown expansion". For, "By Derrida's logic deconstructionism is true structuralism, that is, structuralism come true - the fulfilment of Saussure's central insight"(1986:194-195). Merquior also indicates the twin strategies underlying the Derridean radicalisation of Saussurean linguistics, in particular, the principle of difference. The first involved "the dropping once and for all of the 'kaleidoscope' idea that structure is an identical ground, a core beneath the multiple surfaces"(1986:195). What Merquior indicates here by means of reference to the 'kaleidoscope' metaphor are the radical consequences which follow the ditching by Derrida of the key Saussurean notion of the generation of meaning through the differential relation of signifier/signified within the context of a stable, synchronically conceived linguistic system. It is precisely such a move which underlies and supports the poststructuralist and postmodernist notion of the 'infinite play' of signification. Secondly, Derrida's approach meant "sticking more than ever to the 'mantic' severance of signifier from signified - the purist, Mallarmean view of language, and by extension of other cultural codes"(Merquior,1986:195). The result of the appropriation of Saussure's writings has in certain cases been the development of a conception of language as the virtual free-fall of signification; the view hailed by poststructuralist and postmodernist theorists of a never-ending regress of signifiers in search of signifieds.

The notion of 'context' is evident in both implicit and explicit form within various postmodern and neo-pragmatist accounts of language such as those of Derrida (1977), Lyotard (1984) and Rorty (1989). It remains, however, a category operating at a highly abstract level. As a result what emerges is a conception of language as a phenomenon which floats free of virtually all forms of social determination. When combined with the radical anti-representationalism which it entails, such an abstract approach necessarily brackets the historical investigation of contexts considered in their more concrete political and sociological form and the various unequal distributions of power which exist within them. This, it is argued below (5.3), is precisely where an analysis such as that of Bourdieu (1992) offers a fruitful corrective consistent with the postmodern and pragmatic focus on the question and role of language in social and political life; but also capable of transcending the ahistorical and abstract nature of such accounts. Bourdieu achieves this through a historicization and concretization of the notion of context and its centrality in the generation of meaning in language.

The Saussurean legacy has had an impact on how the sphere of politics itself has come to be conceptualised. As Wexler notes, in some areas of contemporary political theory and political science this has led to the postmodern view of electoral politics, for example, as a 'spectacular system', in other words, to the notion of society as based solely or predominantly on the circulation of signs (1990:168). In this way, Saussure's text, structured as we have seen by the central metaphors of the 'system' and the 'arbitrary' sign/signified relation, has been appropriated by structuralists such as Levi-Strauss, poststructuralists such as Derrida, and by postmodernists such as Lyotard. Hence both Levi-Straussian structuralism and poststructuralist thought are founded on a conception of social systems as phenomena which are organised in line with the logic of a semiotic system. Again it is important to remember we are dealing a particular appropriation of Saussure's writings, one which occurred at a specific historical and socio-political juncture. As Callinicos argues: "A mistaken philosophy of language developed from Saussure's writings encourages post-structuralists to conceive of discourse as a proliferation of signifiers denying us any access to an independent reality or (in the more extreme versions) placing in question the very

existence of such a reality - a conception which also renders problematic post-structuralist discourse itself'(1990:101).

In a similar fashion Derrida and Lyotard develop in a radical way the key Saussurean metaphor of the arbitrary sign. In all of these cases, the appropriation led, in one form or another, to a radical extension of the concept of systematicity from the original context in which it functioned as a speculative and heuristic model formulated to explain the important dimension of language as a synchronic system, to a universal explanation and model which attempts to account for all aspects of the organisation and functioning of social and political systems. Poststructuralist and postmodernist aversion to 'grand theory' notwithstanding, it is, in other words, a prime example of what Wittgenstein termed the 'craving for generality'(1969a: 17-18).

The approach of theorists such as Norris (1991:138ff) and Wood (1985 *passim*;1990:44ff) exhibits a certain selective strategy of appropriation which they attempt to pursue regarding what they consider to be the philosophically and politically positive aspects of postmodernism. Norris, for example, argues for a fundamental distinction to be drawn between the writings of poststructuralist theorists such as Derrida and those of other postmodernists such as Baudrillard and Lyotard. In Norris's view the writings of Derrida are of a qualitatively different order, both philosophically and in terms of their potential for a non-nihilistic socio-political critique. Thus according to Norris: "the first requirement...is that we not give credence to the idea of deconstruction as simply a more specialized, rhetorically sophisticated version of arguments that can also be found in the work of thinkers like Rorty, Baudrillard and Fish. It is largely on account of this erroneous idea that Searle can get away with his cavalier treatment of Derrida as a muddle-headed sophist or wilful perverter of speech-act theory, and also - even more regrettably - that Habermas can avoid any serious engagement with Derrida's texts by assimilating deconstruction to the currency of a Nietzschean irrationalist doctrine carried over into the discourse of postmodern-pragmatist thought"(1991:157-158).

In a similar fashion, Wood (1990) attempts to play down the allegedly nihilistic and apolitical nature of the postmodern and deconstructionist critique. He argues, at times



convincingly, that the latter and philosophy as traditionally conceived have in fact more in common than is generally thought. According to Wood: “deconstruction performs on philosophy itself an operation which philosophy normally applies to the world, to our experience of it, or to our thoughts about it...the operation that seems quite central is defamiliarization, or distancing oneself from the taken-for-granted”(1990:44).

However, despite the encouragement which might be drawn from the above passages by prospective defenders of Derrida and the deconstructionist project, any faith in the existence of an arsenal of extractable and critically progressive weapons with which to ‘complete the project of modernity’ is, I would argue, ultimately misplaced. For, as Merquior (1986) points out, the difference between Foucault and Nietzsche is ultimately one concerning means and not ends. Thus, while Foucault espouses the overt irrationalism of Nietzsche, “Derrida seemingly uses Hegel-like arguments concerning the nature of philosophical discourse to reach the same impeccably Nietzschean conclusions: there is no truth, no objectivity, no disinterested knowledge”(1986:199).

In addition, Norris's defence of Derrida is problematic not least because it is based in large measure on a critique of Derrida's critics which accuses the latter of a ‘partial’ reading of Derrida's writings (see 1990:134-163). As the subtitle of the latter article indicates (“Limited Think: how not to read Derrida”) Norris seems to presuppose here precisely those aspects of modernist socio-political critique which writers such as Derrida have been most keen to deconstruct: namely the notions of authorial intent and of a pre-existing ‘meaning’ inherent within, and extractable from, a given text. Ironically, then, Norris's defence of Derrida itself only becomes intelligible within that very modernist framework of philosophical assumptions which Derrida has vigorously criticised and termed the ‘metaphysics of presence’. Elsewhere Wood himself implicitly acknowledges the dangers associated with any attempted appropriation of deconstructionist tenets. As he notes, with deconstruction “it is the possibility of philosophy itself that is at stake, not simply the adequacy of a particular text”(1990:46).

We might also question what the key deconstructionist notion of writing ‘under erasure’ tells us about the Derridean, and indeed more generally, the postmodern conception of the relation between language, truth and politics. Merquior's analysis, although firmly opposed to Derridean deconstruction, nevertheless goes some way towards answering this question and in the process indicates, perhaps, the suppressed ‘Habermasian’ trace within the writings of Derrida which has helped to encourage and sustain the philosophical and political defences of the latter which have come from theorists in the ‘modernist’ camp such as Norris and Wood. Merquior contrasts, for example, the positions of Derrida and Foucault as follows: “Foucault's position represents the classical irrationalist disparagement of epistemological concerns with valid, critical knowledge. Derrida's attitude is more nuanced. He, too, questions the rationalist claim of cognitive validity and demonstrable truth; but he wants to recast reason rather than just ditch it. Ultimately, Derrida deplores the fact that we cannot dispense with reason, since the inbuilt rationality of language is precisely what foists on us the metaphysical assumptions that meaning is the presence of stable signifieds. Because logos dwells in language, we can neither reject nor rely on such logocentric premises. All we can do, according to the *Of Grammatology's* ‘flying instructions’ is to put our contaminated statements ‘under erasure’ - an abominable mannerism inaugurated by Heidegger to speak not of metaphysics but of Being”(1986:199).

It would seem also that the concept of ‘erasure’ has to be invoked when we examine and try to understand the real-life concrete political interventions of theorists such as Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard. For there exists a glaring contradiction between the politically progressive causes with which these writers have been connected, on the one hand, and their collective undermining at the theoretical level of such key notions as social critique and the concept of justice etc. As Rorty notes of Foucault he “affects to write from a point of view light-years away from the problems of contemporary society. His own efforts at social reform (e.g., of prisons) seem to have no connection with his exhibition of the way in which the ‘humane’ approach to penal reform tied in with the needs of the modern state”(1991:173).



Callinicos, among others, notes the tension which exists in Derrida's writings between a recognition of the social conditions of discourse and the impossibility of any analysis of the latter, since this would necessarily entail a hankering after the "metaphysics of presence"(1989b:77-78). Callinicos locates the central difficulty for any social theory which attempts to base itself on radical deconstructionist or postmodernist tenets. As he points out: "Whatever Derrida's personal political commitments (which do not seem in any case to rise much above a fairly commonplace left liberalism), he is unable to rationally ground them because he denies himself the means either to analyse those existing social arrangements which he rejects or to justify this rejection by outlining some more desirable state of affairs. This position finds its roots - Heidegger aside - in a philosophy of language which moves from the rejection of the atomistic theories of meaning typical of seventeenth-century epistemology to the denial of any relation of discourse to reality. But this move is unnecessary"(1989:79).

The same point is made by McCarthy who argues correctly: "that the 'radicality of deconstruction', as Derrida conceives it, inexorably carries it in the direction of the ineffable, and...while this may be harmless enough when dealing with metaphysics, it is seriously disabling where morals and politics are concerned"(1989:147). As Berman remarks: "Far from trying to change the world, deconstruction does not even want to interpret it but smugly abolishes it instead, writing it off as a figment of the imagination of language. Wars and revolutions are, if noticed at all, regarded as just so many texts and documents: fine enough, unless you get in the way of a bullet"(1990:5). In the same way, the criticism which Ryan brings against the writings of Lyotard is a valid one which applies to postmodern and deconstructionist writing in general. As he points out: "this critique fails to distinguish varieties of rationality or genres of use of reason, and it takes for granted that libidinal freefall will have a happy, rather than a tragic result. It operates with the [necessarily] unarticulated assumption that reason is so embedded in western culture that release from its authoritarian aspects will give rise to a better world rather than to violence, brutality and domination - all former stars of earlier rejections of liberal reason"(1988:563-564).

For these reasons I would concur with the judgement of Peter Dews when he points out that, “there has sometimes been little attempt to think through the ultimate compatibility of progressive political commitments with the dissolution of the subject, or a totalizing suspicion of the concept of truth”(Dews, *The Logics of Disintegration*, p.xv, quoted in Palmer, 1990:46).

#### 1.4 Wittgenstein Contra the Saussurean Paradigm

A key theme of Wittgenstein's later writings is a critique of the notion of language as a ‘calculus’. This is also relevant to the concerns of the present study. In particular, there are a number of features of Wittgenstein’s discussion which help to critically distance his conception of language from that which underlies a good deal of contemporary political and social theory and which, it is argued, is directly traceable to the influence of the Saussurean paradigm.

In the discussion of the philosophical implications which stem from an acceptance of the conception of language as a ‘calculus’ Wittgenstein is concerned to criticise what he regards as the ‘psychological’ or ‘magical’ view of language, a view which had been expressed at the time in the writings of Russell and in the work which Wittgenstein reviewed by Ogden and Richards entitled *The Meaning of Meaning* (See Hilmy, 1987:99). It is commonly assumed that Wittgenstein himself abandoned the ‘calculus’ conception of language which he had subscribed to in the *Tractatus* and in the early manuscripts of the 1930s. This model of language is generally assumed to have been abandoned by the end of the *Blue* and *Brown Books* era, i.e., the mid 1930s. Baker and Hacker, for example, argue that the ‘calculus’ conception of language was replaced by one embodied in the notion of a ‘language game’(Wittgenstein: *Understanding and Meaning*, pp.89-93, cited in Hilmy, p.98.)

It is also important to note, however, the continued (albeit less frequent) use of the term ‘calculus’ by Wittgenstein in the later writings including the *Philosophical Investigations*. This is significant from the point of view of the present section of the study in light of the attempts made to draw certain parallels between the writings of Wittgenstein and those of Saussure. Harris (1988), for example, attempts to assimilate the later writings of Wittgenstein, including in particular the *Philosophical*

*Investigations*, with those of Saussure. This is a project which involves Harris in an attempt to find a counterpart within Wittgenstein's later writings of the Saussurean notion of a 'linguistic system'. In doing so Harris, not surprisingly, focuses on the conception of language as a 'calculus' as a possible candidate. In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein had regarded the 'calculus' conception of language as an expression of the essence of language itself. Harris's line of interpretation, however, is rendered problematic by Wittgenstein's later rejection of this notion (PI §107-108). This is, for example, precisely the view of language as an abstract and asocial system which is under fire in the Wittgensteinian critique of the Augustinian notion of language (PI §1-38).

One factor lending Harris's interpretation initial credibility is Wittgenstein's use of the term 'calculus' in referring to language in his later writings. Also worth noting is the fact that Wittgenstein uses the term 'system' in his early and transitional writings in referring to language (See Hilmy, 99,103-108.) However, as Hilmy argues: "[Wittgenstein's] use of spatial metaphors...should not taken not in a formal and abstract sense, but rather as a figurative way of referring to concrete domains or loci of actual linguistic practice"(1987:129-130). As Wittgenstein himself wrote: "This is a very one-sided way of looking at language. In practice we very rarely use language as such a calculus..." (Wittgenstein, *Blue Book*, quoted in Hilmy, 1987:106). In other words, the retention and occasional use of certain terminological expressions by Wittgenstein should not blind us to the fundamental reorientation which takes place in Wittgenstein's thought concerning language. I would therefore agree with Hilmy's position that: "...the term 'calculus'...in the post-1930 manuscripts should not be taken in a Tractarian sense"(1987:99).

Moreover, I would argue that those features and connotations which Wittgenstein wishes to criticise in the 'calculus' conception of language in fact mirror the chief characteristics of the Saussurean paradigm of a linguistic 'system'. What needs to be emphasised therefore is the significance of Wittgenstein's repudiation of the 'calculus' conception of language in favour of a view of language which underlines its socially-embedded nature. Wittgenstein's later view of language, in other words, is a thoroughly social conception and thus stands in direct contrast to the semiotic

and abstractly systemic notion expressed in the writings of Saussure in which meaning is not something socially determined by use but rather purely by the differential interplay of signs in a synchronic system.<sup>6</sup>

While Saussure employs the language-as-game metaphor in order to emphasise the independent, synchronic and abstract system of *langue* – a notion which bears a striking resemblance to the Tractarian ‘calculus’ conception of language – Wittgenstein by contrast employs the metaphor of language-as-game in his later writings in order to reinforce the diametrically opposed view of language as a thoroughly social system. In so doing, he further undermines the idea of a timeless, static order of language as found in his earlier writings. With respect to the Saussurean analogy between the operation of language and the moves in a chess game, Ricoeur notes the superficial nature of any such resemblance (1996:128). As Ricoeur also notes: “This separates the semantics of Saussurean-school linguists from that of philosophers like Carnap, Wittgenstein, and so on, for whom semantics is fundamentally the analysis of the relationships between signs and the things denoted”(1986:124). The difference between understanding the ‘rules’ and understanding the ‘grammar’ of chess is important in further distancing Wittgenstein’s writings from the Saussurean paradigm. From the perspective of the Saussurean paradigm, all we need to know are the rules governing the differential relations between the pieces on the board. However, to understand the meaning of chess as a socially-embedded phenomenon we require to understand its grammar in the Wittgensteinian sense of the term i.e., the practical significance which playing it, or any other game, has within the wider social context of a form of life.

It should be stressed once again that Saussure himself in no way rejected completely the significance of the diachronic or historical dimension of language. It also follows that neither is he necessarily opposed to a recognition of language as a social institution. Indeed, commentators frequently draw parallels between the writings of Saussure and those of Durkheim with reference in particular to Saussure’s conception of language as a ‘social fact’(See, for example, Williams, 1977:27-28). Nevertheless, one of the key themes of the present study consists in drawing out the connections which exist between the Saussurean model of language and the

implications flowing from the appropriation and development by poststructuralist and postmodernist theorists of a conception of language which awards theoretical primacy to a static, synchronic and therefore asocial view of the latter.

## Chapter 2

### A 'Praxis' for the 'Prison-House' of Language: the Politics of Postmodernism

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#### 2.1 *The Role of Language in the Postmodern Perspective*

Central to the poststructuralist and postmodern perspectives has been the focus on the constitutive dimensions of language; the notion that language not merely reflects, but shapes, in various important ways, our perceptions of the world. Thus an important element within the postmodern critique of language consists in rejecting the notion of a set of discourses, whether scientific or political, having privileged access to 'reality'. According to Lyotard, for example, the essence of postmodernism (if, indeed, one can speak here of 'essences') consists in an "incredulity towards metanarratives". It is thus distinguished from the project and standpoint of modernism. For Lyotard, the term 'modern' "designate[s] any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse...making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of the Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth"(1984:xxiii). One of the consequences, according to Lyotard, is that: "In contemporary society and culture - postindustrial society, postmodern culture - the question of the legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms. The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation"(1984:37).

The linguistic basis of the postmodern critique is also exhibited in its undermining of the classical theory of representation, a strategy enunciated most notably perhaps in Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1980). The deconstructionist and postmodernist critique of traditional conceptions of language clearly has relevance

for the Habermasian attempt to 'complete the project of modernity'. In particular, the radical thesis of incommensurability as formulated by Lyotard (1984) on the basis of his particular reading of the Wittgensteinian concept of language games represents a potentially serious obstacle to the latter.

Perhaps one of the most powerful objections to the postmodern critique concerns the inescapability of performative self-contradiction. Pitkin, for example, echoes Habermas, among others, in pointing out that the dilemma of performative self-contradiction arises for any critique of language which seriously calls into question the notion of extra-discursive reference (1993:111ff). For Habermas, the postmodern critique of language only remains intelligible if there is preserved "at least one standard for [the] explanation of the corruption of all reasonable standards"(Habermas, "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-reading Dialectic of Enlightenment", quoted in Rorty, 1991:164). Thus at the heart of Habermas's writings lies an attempted defence of the Enlightenment project through an essentially Kantian philosophical demonstration of the alleged essence of human language. Foucault's critique of language poses the same problems for its adherents as do those of Lyotard and Derrida: namely, the problem of performative contradiction and the undercutting of their respective theses due to the radical and all-encompassing nature of the latter (see Shapiro,1981:155).

As Norris points out, there are a number of important philosophical replies to the postmodern critique of meaning and reference (1990:186ff). In addition, Norris suggests, in a manner reminiscent of G.E.Moore's 'common-sense' critique of scepticism, that the response: "could take various forms, among them the flat rejoinder that there are real and present facts of experience - inequality, deprivation, urban squalor, unemployment, massive and increasing differentials of wealth and power - which make nonsense of [the postmodern] case that nothing exists outside the endless circulation of ungrounded arbitrary signs"(1990:188).<sup>7</sup>

Of course, it will immediately be objected by advocates of the postmodern approach that all of the points made in the above passage are simply misplaced and inappropriate, insofar as they fail to appreciate fully the radical nature of the postmodern critique of language. Hence, it will be argued, to appeal to notions such



as 'power', 'social context', etc., is to become beguiled by the necessarily fruitless search for 'presence' or 'essence'. All such concepts, so the critique goes, find no corresponding extra-linguistic referents which are capable of securing their meaning in such a way as to avoid their being vulnerable to deconstructionist strategies.

If the postmodern critique of language as referential is deemed successful it might suggest that rhetoric had eventually triumphed in its long historic struggle with episteme.<sup>8</sup> The critique would highlight, in other words, the inadequacy of any purely cognitive, rational conception of language as a communicator and guarantor of truths concerning objective reality. In this way, the thesis of the underdetermination of theory by data might be seen as re-establishing the primacy of rhetoric and vindicating the Aristotelian rather than the Platonic conception of the role of language and its relation to the concept of truth. It might be argued, therefore, that our conception of argumentation and our standards of proof require to be widened in order to take in the rhetorical and the narrative, as well as the purely rational and epistemic.

However, as we shall see in the following sections, there are profound problems associated with any generalisation and application of this line of thought to the sphere of the socio-political. These become apparent in the attempt by Lyotard, and Rorty, among others, to apply this line of thinking in their conceptualisation of a 'postmodern politics'. The contradictory nature of such a project is evident, in particular, in the unintentional and implicit but nevertheless frequent reversion to those universalistic (in Lyotard's eyes 'terroristic') concepts which are required in order to ground even a minimal conception of human rights or justice.

Also important to note, (lest postmodernists attempt to appropriate him as one of their own), is the fact that the Aristotelian conception of rhetoric was but one part of a larger and more encompassing 'grand narrative'; namely, Aristotle's teleological metaphysics, a feature which functioned to offset the relativist implications which the former inevitably engendered. For Aristotle (1991), the assertion of the innate goodness of the rhetor, and of man in general, is grounded in teleological assumptions concerning the ends at which they necessarily aim. Thus, according to Aristotle: "...Men are sufficiently disposed towards what is true and most of the time



they attain the truth”(1991:11355a,15-17). Yet this form of metaphysical safety-net and its later manifestations in various Enlightenment and modernist forms is precisely what is missing from the postmodern perspective, having been ruthlessly expunged as a result of the radical nature of its critique of language.

For these and other reasons, I believe, the radical nature of postmodern claims concerning the alleged nature of language must be regarded as unacceptable, at least in the form in which they been presented up till now. However, they need not be abandoned as entirely unfruitful. On the contrary, there are some important connections, for example, between the notion of restricted speech-codes enunciated by Basil Bernstein (1971) (1973) and Lyotard's concept of the differend (see Barron, 1992:35f). As Mueller argues: “An individual's language can be so constricted that communication with members of other groups not subject to an identical linguistic and social environment becomes difficult if not impossible”(1973:54). In other words, there may well exist a more empirical, sociological basis of support for a weaker form of the thesis of ‘incommensurability’ than that which has been put forward by Lyotard (1984). This would only come, however, from research into the social and political basis of restricted codes.

## *2.2 Why Language Matters: A Wittgensteinian Critique of Wickham's Anti-Abstractionism*

Wickham raises questions concerning the extent of generalisation appropriate for arguments designed to aid political analysis and engagement (1990:126). Wickham's view is worth examining in more detail for it brings out a number of important themes concerning the relation between language and the political which feature in the writings of both ‘modern’ and postmodern theorists.

At the philosophical level, Wickham insists on the need to focus on what he argues are necessarily ‘particular’ and ‘discrete’ spheres such as feminism, etc., in assessing the political relevance and implications of the postmodern perspective. The argument is essentially the Lyotardian one that this is the only way in which to respect the ‘little narratives’ from the ‘terror’ imposed via the all-encompassing ‘metanarratives’(See Lyotard, 1984).

Wickham's argument, however, seems fundamentally flawed in a number of respects. Firstly, it overlooks the fact (pointed out perhaps most notably by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*) that human understanding of a complex reality is only possible through a process of organisation and classification involving concepts, or what Kant terms 'categories'. Only through the use of such concepts, it is argued, are humans able to structure an otherwise amorphous mass of perceptual input. As Kant points out: "intuitions without concepts are blind"(1933:93). From the perspective of contemporary linguistic theory Chomsky makes the similar point that: "Perception involves categorization" (Chomsky, *Cartesian Linguistics*, pp.123-31, cited in Edelman, 1977:23).

Kant is, of course, concerned to limit his discussion of the basic categories or concepts to those which are concerned with the perception of nature such as causality, and to point out the dangers associated with the improper application of *a priori* concepts and Ideas i.e., general notions such as moral freedom which are neither applicable to nor abstracted from perception. Nevertheless, we can still speak - following Whorf (1965), Chawla (1991), Bernstein (1971) (1973), and Mueller (1973), - of an analogous process whereby language itself provides a conceptual structure that is socially generated and disseminated, and hence of political significance, and some version of which is essential for the orientation of individuals in society.

Secondly, it is ironic that Wickham, who claims (in line with postmodernists such as Lyotard) to be a follower of Wittgenstein, should be so apparently blind to the latter's critique of the fallacy of 'atomism' i.e., the notion that concepts or situations can be reductively analysed into their constituent parts until, finally, one reaches their allegedly irreducible elements (see Wittgenstein, PI esp. §§39,60,91). In short, Wickham's argument seems philosophically naive.

From a political perspective Wickham's account is equally problematic. Firstly, it is highly questionable whether social actors, in attempting to orient themselves and to intervene politically in society, can be said to focus, either practically or in principle, on 'single issues' as Wickham advocates. On the contrary, it would seem that in attempting to make sense of various complex socio-political situations such actors

must necessarily concern themselves precisely with the larger concepts and contexts which Wickham, in line with postmodernists such as Lyotard, regards as 'totalizing' and dangerous 'abstractions'. Feminists, for example, in order to rationally ground any relevant form of political action arguably require recourse to their own particular form of 'metanarrative', which at the most basic level would consist in a belief in the existence of a history of phallogentric domination etc. Otherwise, as Lovibond correctly points out: "it remains a mystery how we can hope to achieve an equal sexual division of power unless we are 'allowed' (by epistemology and political theory) to address the structural causes of existing sexual inequality"(1990:172).

In other words, feminists, like all political actors who are not merely Nietzschean irrationalists (and even in the latter case it is doubtful whether they could be said to operate without some form of legitimating architectonic - albeit in this case the negative Nietzschean 'genealogy' - which provides a 'rationale') do not merely engage in strictly delimited forms of political action the justification of which is likewise hermetically sealed within the same sphere, and thus makes no appeal to 'abstractions' such as 'power', 'justice', 'history' etc. Yet the result of Wickham's atomistic methodological prescriptions would be to make impossible any analysis or critique by groups such as feminists and others of the social origin and basis of their oppression, since they rule out any reliance on alleged 'abstractions' such as 'capitalism', or 'patriarchal society' etc.

The consequences flowing from Wickham's prescriptions, assuming it were possible to adhere to them, would consist in an effective undercutting of any normative basis for the critical claims of such groups and others in society. In objective political terms they would result in a reinforcement of the status quo. Wickham, no doubt, along with postmodernists in general, would object to concepts such as 'power' etc., as dangerous and intellectually enslaving abstractions. However, such reactions are typical of an approach whose reification of the linguistic dimensions of power is one which simultaneously entails a critical silence regarding the concrete socio-political basis and manifestations of the latter.

There is, however, an important sense in which Murray Edelman's writings on the language/politics relation help to render intelligible the concern expressed by

theorists such as Wickham and Lyotard with the potential consequences of the process of categorisation. As Edelman points out: “Political and ideological debate consists very largely of efforts to win acceptance of a particular categorization of an issue in the face of competing efforts in behalf of a different one; but because participants are likely to see it as a dispute either about facts or about individual values, the linguistic (that is, social) basis of perceptions is usually unrecognized”(1977:25).

The point, however, is not to argue, as does Wickham, for an end to such categorisation, but rather to focus attention on the institutional and political dimensions of the phenomenon; in particular, the unequal distribution of what Bourdieu (see below, 5.3) has termed ‘symbolic capital’, i.e., that proportionally greater power exercised in society by those in a position to successfully disseminate and secure the acceptance of their particular preferred socio-political categorisations or abstractions.

In arguing for the former position Wickham exhibits, along with Simone Weil (1978) and postmodernists such as Lyotard (1984), both a misunderstanding and a morbid fear of conceptual abstraction and its fundamental, arguably inseparable, role in the orientation of human socio-political action. This represents another instance of the mistrust of language characteristic, for example, of the writings of Locke (see e.g.1976, Book III, chs. IX, X, XI). Such mistrust, through the bewitching power which it inevitably imputes to language *per se*, goes hand in hand with the postmodern tendency towards a form of linguistic reification and to what Palmer (1990) has correctly identified as an uncritical and ahistorical ‘descent into discourse’.

### *2.3 Language and Liberation: The Appeal of Postmodernism as a Politically Progressive Development*

In an attempt to counter the often levelled charges concerning its allegedly apolitical, nihilistic and hence ultimately conservative implications, much is made within poststructuralist and postmodernist writings of the notion of the politically liberating consequences which flow from a critique of the traditional 'positivist' or 'representationalist' conception of language. In particular, deconstruction with its emphasis on the supposedly endless 'play of signification' is heralded as the linguistic counterpart to freedom in the social and political realm, since, it is argued, the semantic basis of the old hierarchies which underpinned various forms of oppression can now be undermined.

For example, with regard to the political relevance of deconstruction Derrida argues in "The Conflict of Faculties" that: "It is...a way of taking a position, in its work of analysis, concerning the political and institutional structures that make possible and govern our practices, our competencies, our performances. Precisely because it is never concerned only with signified content, deconstruction should not be separable from th[e] politico-institutional problematic and should seek a new investigation of responsibility, an investigation which questions the codes inherited from ethics and politics. This means that, too political for some, it will seem paralyzing to those who only recognize politics by the most familiar road signs"(quoted in Culler, 1983:156).

In a similar fashion, Michael Ryan points to the connection allegedly existing between the postmodern critique of language - in particular, the classical theory of representation - and socio-political critique. As he writes: "One of the central objects of critique in postmodern philosophy...is the classical theory of representation, which held that meaning or truth preceded and determined the representation that communicated it. This theory is associated in postmodern philosophy with social normativity, so that the critique of representation comes to have a political value. The argument for the rhetorical power of material effectivity of representation is also an argument against classical patriarchal and capitalist ideologies that secured

legitimacy by grounding social institutions in truths or ideas of substance held to be outside representation altogether”(1988:559).

The postmodern critique of language has also been welcomed with enthusiasm by certain feminists who regard it as an effective strategy in exposing and undermining the various ways in which theories of language and knowledge have traditionally supported patterns and institutions of male domination. Palmer, for example, notes the close links which exist between contemporary developments in linguistics and the philosophy of language and the underlying rationale and methodological approach of feminist criticism (1990:149ff). On a more general level, as White (1991) has illustrated, there exists a close relation between the postmodern and poststructuralist critiques of language and epistemology and the emergence and political orientation of the so-called ‘new social movements’. As he points out: “For such groups, the growth of incredulity toward traditional metanarratives is particularly unlikely to be seen as a source of fear and trembling, but instead as a source of some cognitive space within which new orientations may have a better chance to flourish”(1991:11).

Nevertheless, the postmodern critique of language and epistemology can also be a politically ambiguous weapon for such groups. As Andrea Nye points out, it is ironic: “that at the very moment in the late twentieth century when the claims of women and oppressed ethnic groups for justice have been expressed most articulately, the power of language to name reality and tell truths is called into question. Just as women and people of color [sic] have managed to name injustice; it turns out that the world is a text. Just as women and people of color found the voice to speak, it turns out that there is no speaking subject, only discursive or logical structures in which the subject is constituted”(1994:116-117).

In this respect, and despite its radical pretensions, the majority of postmodern writing is, among other things, highly vulnerable to the charge of linguistic idealism, i.e., the notion, firstly, that socio-political institutions and structures are entirely or in large part constituted by discourse concerning them, and, secondly, that somehow a ‘reinterpretation’ ‘redescription’ or ‘disarticulation’ of such socio-political conditions is effectively equivalent to a transcendence of them. In this respect, Haber notes the postmodern borrowing from Saussure’s writings of the notions of ‘difference’ and



‘play’. One of the most important political implications of the postmodern perspective is contained in the notion that “Everything we are and do is formulated within language...where language is understood as an open-ended sign system. Our possibilities are as infinite and as open to redescription as are the opportunities for redescription given to us by language”(Haber, 1994:3).

#### 2.4 Wittgenstein Contra Linguistic Idealism

The notion of infinite redescription together with the social and political implications which it entails is a prime example of the linguistic idealism which results from the illicit transference and subsequent universalization of a model or ‘picture’ of language from the sphere of linguistics to that of the political. With respect to the issue of ‘linguistic idealism’ it is crucial to note exactly what this does and does not entail and where Wittgenstein’s perspective stands with regard to the notion. In particular, there is a need to distinguish the version of ‘linguistic idealism’ criticised here from the conception advanced by Anscombe (1976).

From the point of view of the present study, one of the central and most valuable points expressed by Anscombe’s formulation involves a highlighting of the important role of linguistic and conceptual structures in constituting human social practices and institutions. However, in contrast to the writings of certain poststructuralists and postmodernists, this does not in Anscombe’s case involve the assumption that language is all that is important in the process. In this sense Anscombe is in line with the perspective of Wittgenstein with regard to this issue. As Anscombe points out: “The competent use of language is *a* criterion for the possession of the concepts symbolised in it, and so we are at liberty to say: to have such-and-such linguistic practices is to have such-and-such concepts. ‘Linguistic practice’ here does not mean merely the production of words properly arranged into sentences on occasions which we vaguely call ‘suitable’. It is important that it includes activities *other* than the production of language, into which a use of language is interwoven”(1976:117).

Against the notion of Wittgenstein as a linguistic idealist in the poststructuralist and postmodernist sense, Easton argues that: “Just as Wittgenstein’s ‘linguistic idealism’ is based on the production of language within a material context, so Marx’s

materialism locates material forces primarily in a social context and can therefore be distinguished from mechanistic materialism”(1983:115). It is important to emphasise here this notion, highlighted by Easton, of “the production of language within a material context”. For it helps to further counter the frequently idealistic or linguistically reductionist appropriations of Wittgenstein’s later perspective on language. Moreover, the key Marxist notion of humans ‘making history’ but within particular historical and social contexts, parallels Wittgenstein’s insistence on the socially-embedded nature of language and the various constraints both sociological and political on the production, operation and reception of language which such contextualisation entails.

According to Conway, Wittgenstein offers a middle, dialectical position on the issue of the relation between language and reality. As Conway suggests: “He has moved beyond maintaining human knowledge of reality as existing in itself prior to the human subject’s presence. He does not speak of a rational subject arbitrarily legislating reality. The transcendental subject and the transcendental object have been left behind. Rather than a unilateral relation between reality and language, one finds a reciprocal one. Our conceptual networks do not mirror reality in itself, nor are they the legislative creations of an individual subject. They belong to our common linguistic activities, our forms of life, which cannot be further explained or grounded”(1989:115).

This, it is argued more fully throughout the following sections of this study, is precisely one of Wittgenstein’s major strengths compared to the conception of the language-world relationship expressed in the writings of certain poststructuralist and postmodernist theorists. Nevertheless, as remarks such as “*Our* conceptual networks”, “*our* common linguistic activities”, “*our* forms of life” indicate, there remains an uncritical, and apolitical homogeneity implicit within Conway’s otherwise valuably corrective account. Such features are shared with Wittgenstein’s writings and it is for this reason, as already suggested, that we sometimes require to go beyond and develop in a more explicit form the social and political implications of Wittgenstein’s writings.



The notion of language as socially contextualised is emphasised throughout Wittgenstein's later writings and is of vital importance in countering linguistic idealism. The situating of language within a network of concrete social practices also underlines the fact that the political significance accorded by sections of contemporary thought to the constitutive dimension of language can only properly be regarded as a dependent variable. In other words, a methodological approach more in line with Wittgenstein's injunction to 'look and see' (PI §66) rather than succumb to the 'craving for generality' (PI §104) is required. This kind of approach stands in contrast to the acontextual assumptions which frequently lie behind the conception and treatment of language and its constitutive dimension found in the writings of certain poststructuralist and postmodernist theorists. A central feature of the latter perspectives is the *a priori* assumption that there has occurred a qualitative shift in the contemporary constitutive, redescriptive, or deconstructive power of language across all spheres and at all times regardless of context. This is another key element in the linguistic idealism engendered by certain contemporary readings of the linguistic turn.

Thus, according to Bowles and Gintis: "A discourse is a set of tools. People use these tools to forge the unities that provide the basis for their collective social practices...Lacking an intrinsic connection to a set of ideas, words, like tools, may be borrowed. Indeed, like weapons in a revolutionary war, some of the most effective words are captured from the dominant class"(1986:153). "In society meanings are not fixed, they are prizes in a pitched conflict among groups attempting to constitute their social identity by transforming the communicative tools that link their members together and set them apart from others"(1986:157).

Despite the surface similarity to the perspective of Wittgenstein (as conveyed in the analogy between the uses of language and tools) these passages by Bowles and Gintis actually indicate the extent to which their analysis of the language/world relationship is open to criticism from the former viewpoint. Firstly, there is no recognition of what Wittgenstein refers to as "hinge propositions"(See Wittgenstein, 1969, §341,343,655). Rather, in the view of theorists such as Bowles and Gintis, as well as that of Laclau, Mouffe and Hall, words, like tools, are things which may

simply be borrowed. Consequently, this conception of language shares a similar weakness with that which underlies the analyses of Laclau, Mouffe and Hall, namely, an overestimation of the socio-political significance of ‘description’ or ‘re-description’, ‘articulation’ or ‘disarticulation’. In short, there is a failure to pay sufficient attention to the socio-political analogues of Wittgenstein’s metaphorical distinction, drawn most strikingly in the writings in *On Certainty*, between those propositions belonging to the ‘river’ and those characteristic of the ‘river-bed’(1969,§95-97) in order to understand the social and political reasons why some propositions rather than others should ‘stand fast’ within a particular society.

Secondly, while Bowles and Gintis rightly encourage us to focus on the role of discourse and struggles over discourse as “a key to understanding the formation and solidarity of collective social actors”(1986:153), there is nevertheless a failure to recognise that such actors are fundamentally unequal in terms of their status and in terms of their access to the various resources required for the effective ‘redescription’ of their current social and political identities and positions.

There is another formulation of the linguistic turn that we can appeal to and which is found in the writings of social and political theorists ranging from Aristotle, to those of Austin and Bourdieu. In this version there is a recognition of the social and political significance of language, but this is tied to an appreciation of language as a socially-situated phenomenon. The latter is in fact precisely what preserves the political nature of language, in contrast to certain poststructuralist and postmodernist writings which, by operating with a predominantly semiotic conception of context, succeed in erasing notions of inequality and power with respect to language.

The imputation of a radical transformative significance to language can be traced to the ‘picture’ of language contained in the Saussurean idea of a linguistic system, and the idea of the ‘arbitrary’ nature of the signifier/signified relation later radicalised by poststructuralist and postmodernist theorists. An adherence to a purely logical conception of the ‘arbitrary’ nature or ‘contingency’ of language in turn underpins a faith in the ever-present possibility of infinite ‘redescription’. Such a perspective omits, however, any adequate recognition of the constraints which flow from the operation of language as a socially-embedded phenomenon as opposed to a purely

semiotic system. It is an idealist view which, through a reification of the notion of the 'contingency' of language implies that all users are equally free to redescribe and thus to change the social relations and institutions of the society which they inhabit.

The notion of 'context' which we encounter in poststructuralist and postmodern writings is - in line with the generative metaphor of a linguistic 'system' by which it was in large part transmitted and disseminated - construed in a predominantly abstract and semiotic fashion. This applies, for example, to the much vaunted notions of 'readership' (a key term within postmodern writings referring to the allegedly progressive political potential of semantic and textual indeterminacy) and 'polysemy' as strategies of supposedly critical postmodern resistance. As Jensen (1990) has shown in his analysis of the media, however, there are concrete social, economic, and political limits imposed on the extent of 'readership' open to language users (1990:234). As Callinicos argues, from within a postmodern perspective: "'Resistance' can all too easily become an aesthetic or moral stance rather than a genuinely political matter" ("Postmodernism, Post-structuralism, Post-Marxism", quoted in Wickham, 1990:174).

Jensen's point concerning the media is a forceful reminder of the concrete socio-political dimensions which are necessarily associated with the notion of 'context' properly understood - something all too often overlooked by postmodernists such as Daly (1994), Laclau (1988) and Mouffe (1988) in their enthusiasm to embrace the allegedly emancipatory potential offered by 'polysemy' and 'indeterminacy' (cf. Daly, 1994). Jensen's analysis is supported by that of McGuigan (1992:178) who provides further criticism of the alleged emancipatory potential of polysemy.

In connection with the claim made by advocates of postmodernist and deconstructionist critiques that the undermining of the traditional conception of language leads to pluralism and to respect for the other, it is also worth looking briefly at the impact which these critiques are having within other areas of the social sciences. As various commentators such as Palmer (1990), Patterson (1989), and Mayfield (1991) have shown, the deconstructionist and postmodernist emphasis on the importance of language has had a significant impact within the field of social history. Here again, not surprisingly, the political implications of these critiques for

our understanding of history are a matter of some contention. However, at the very least the debate serves to raise some troubling aspects often obscured by the rhetoric concerning the positive and liberating aspects of a postmodernist perspective.

For example, as Patterson's article indicates, there is an intellectually repressive dimension associated with the deconstructionist critique which is antithetical to the much vaunted pluralism usually claimed for it. As Patterson points out, an important and worrying aspect of this is that: "This line of reasoning [i.e., deconstruction] [has] bracketed alternative explanations of history, excluding them from consideration"(1989:83). Patterson's analysis also lends support to the view, often expressed, that certain deconstructionist and postmodernist approaches are potentially conservative in their social and political implications - a criticism which also forms a central part of the present study. Ostensibly, of course, such approaches would appear to sanction an infinite variety of theoretically innovative and challenging interpretations of historical and political events. Such approaches, it is often argued, are healthily iconoclastic - capable of questioning and undermining the currently dominant intellectual orthodoxies together with the systems of associated values and institutions which they support.

However, the radical nature of their critique of meaning and the notion of extra-discursive reference is often such as to result in a nihilistic form of intellectual levelling which effectively undercuts the theoretical and normative basis required for any meaningful and effective critique of currently dominant ideas and institutions. As Patterson notes with regard to deconstruction, it is a method which yields, "a theoretical pluralism that neither challenge[s] nor engage[s] in any critical way conflicting representations or reconstructions of past societies [one thinks immediately here of David Irving and other revisionist 'historians' who deny the occurrence of the Holocaust - EF]...Thus it serves to maintain the status quo"(1989:84).

However, while recognising this important negative dimension associated with certain deconstructionist and postmodernist approaches to language and politics Patterson also appears at times to subscribe - along with commentators in other areas such as Norris (1991), Ryan (1988:562) and Wood (1985;1990) - to the already noted

view that it is somehow possible to selectively incorporate certain central elements of the former into the critical study of history. The problems accompanying any such strategy are identified elsewhere in Patterson's discussion of power. As he correctly points out: "...a critical analysis of power and how it is constituted in the particular societies being investigated is crucial. This must be a central element of any historical enquiry [sic], even those that profess post-structuralist or postmodernist inspiration and orientation" (1989:87).

Nevertheless, Patterson underestimates the global nature of the postmodern critique of meaning and reference and the intellectual and political implications this has for the study of history and socio-political events in general. The degree of underestimation becomes evident when Patterson cites Derrida and Foucault to bolster his point concerning the importance for historians of the critical analysis of power in society. Patterson fails to appreciate the extent to which Foucault's critique of power would apply equally well to any critical argument, such as Patterson recommends, which purports to indicate the locus, nature and abuse of power in society. For in Foucault's view, any such critique would merely represent another discursive instance of a contending will-to-power with no special claim to extra-linguistic validation.<sup>9</sup> Such difficulties support the view that there can be no form of 'safe', or 'partial' appropriation of the allegedly radical and progressively critical dimensions of the postmodern and deconstructive critique, which is not also ultimately fundamentally debilitating in philosophical, normative and political terms. In other words, in opening the philosophico-political Pandora's Box of postmodernism one is not free to choose the nature of the contents emerging, or to control their repercussions.

## Section II

### **Poststructuralism /Postmodernism: A 'Politics' that Dare not Speak its Name**

#### **Richard Rorty: The Contingency of Language and the Politics of Redescription**

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In the view of many theorists there exists a close relation between the poststructuralist and postmodernist critique of language and epistemology, and the emergence and political orientation of the so-called 'new social movements' such as feminism, multiculturalism etc. It is argued, however, that due to the nature of the conception of language underlying the poststructuralist and postmodern critique this is in fact a politically ambiguous weapon for such groups to adopt. There are profound problems associated with the generalisation and application of the line of thought underlying the Saussurean paradigm to the sphere of the socio-political. These problems become apparent in the attempt by theorists such as Lyotard, Rorty, Mouffe and Laclou, among others, to apply this line of thinking in their conceptualisation of a postmodern politics.

In the following two sections on Rorty and Lyotard, the account draws a good deal on the arguments and analysis advanced by Haber (1994). In particular, the present study is in agreement with the perspective of Haber concerning the importance of understanding the particular conception of language underlying the writings of Rorty and Lyotard, and the implications this has for their respective social and political theories. Where the present study differs from the account offered by Haber is in, firstly, the attempt to locate this underlying conception of language which unites poststructuralist, pragmatist and postmodernist theorists, more firmly within the Saussurean paradigm and its consequent appropriations (See, however, Haber, 1994:11-12). Secondly, the present study seeks to develop, as already indicated above, a form of immanent critique of the conception of language in question by invoking the later writings of Wittgenstein - a perspective which both Lyotard and Rorty, to varying degrees, claim allegiance to. Thirdly, as will be indicated in the



course of the discussion, Habermas's analysis - which in many key respects is valuable in both the identification and criticism of the problems associated with poststructuralism and postmodernism - nevertheless arguably accepts too uncritically one of their central tenets, namely, the alleged impossibility of any representational role for language.

In addition to an identification of the conception of language underlying Rorty's account, this section will also outline some of the main ways in which a Wittgensteinian perspective properly understood problematises Rorty's account of the role of language in the sphere of the socio-political. In the course of this a number of further issues will inevitably be raised concerning some of the key concepts of the Wittgensteinian perspective on language such as 'language games' 'form of life' and Wittgenstein's discussion of the notion of a private language. In addition, issues relating to the nature and status of the Wittgensteinian perspective itself will inevitably arise. While the importance of these issues is here acknowledged, the extended discussion required is postponed until section III of the thesis. The latter is devoted to an in-depth examination of these key Wittgensteinian themes and in particular to a demonstration of the validity of an extension of the underlying logic of such concepts from their original context in Wittgenstein's writings to issues in the sphere of the socio-political. Also treated in section III is the broader issue of whether the Wittgensteinian perspective itself as applied to the sphere of social science is one which, as is frequently argued, inevitably entails conservatism.

In the present section Wittgenstein's approach will be provisionally shown to problematise the key Rortyan thesis concerning the alleged contingency of language. It will be shown how this in turn leads to an illustration of the philosophical basis of Rorty's linguistic idealism. In this way a Wittgensteinian perspective on language, it will be argued, also represents an immanent critique of Rorty's idealist and elitist political prescriptions which are implicitly based respectively on the ideas of 'contingency' 'redescription' and on the line of thought underlying the much criticised notion of a private language.



### 3.1 Rorty: *The Underlying Conception of Language*

The idea of the ‘contingency’ of language is a key theme running throughout Rorty’s writings (see, in particular, 1989:3-22, esp. pp.13,22). In this chapter I want firstly to state the possible similarities, and then more importantly, bring out the significant differences between Rorty and Wittgenstein with regard to this idea. We can begin by noting that, according to Rorty, “truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent for their existence upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths” (1989:21, see also Haber, 1994:45). As we shall see in more detail below, in Rorty’s focus upon the sentence there is a distinct narrowing of context typical of poststructuralism and postmodernism in general.

Equally important from our point of view is the fact that Rorty claims to draw support for his reading of the notion of contingency from the writings of Wittgenstein. Thus according to Rorty “what Wittgenstein and [Donald] Davidson do for our language [is] exhibit its sheer contingency”(1989:22.) The rejection in Wittgenstein’s later writings of the Tractarian conception of language as essentially representational, coupled with the associated emphasis on the concept of language as use lends plausibility to the idea that language, for Wittgenstein, is ‘contingent’. However, Rorty’s contention that Wittgenstein’s writings exhibit the ‘sheer contingency’ of language ignores the Wittgensteinian focus on a conception of language-games viewed, not as free-floating autonomous entities, but as intertwined within and constrained by, the concrete practices of a particular form of life. Thus in contrast to the reductionism which frequently lies at the heart of the poststructuralist and postmodernist perspective we are encouraged to view language as an amalgam of concrete human actions coupled with linguistic utterance within a social matrix of rules, practices and conventions. In this respect it is worthwhile noting Wittgenstein’s view that: “We don’t start from certain words, but from certain occasions or activities” (Wittgenstein, “Lectures on Ethics”, cited in Conway, 1989:42).

In Rorty’s writings no real argument is offered for the thesis that language is ‘contingent’. Rorty in effect constructs a ‘just so’ story. Thus according to Rorty: “About two hundred years ago, the idea that truth was made rather than found began to take hold of the imagination of Europe”(1989:3). By way of illustration of one of

his key themes with respect to language, Rorty chooses to refer to the French Revolution as the period during which the power of ‘redescription’ dawned on humanity (1989:3). According to Rorty: “The French Revolution had shown that the whole vocabulary of social relations...could be replaced almost overnight” (1989:3). The choice of example is, however, ironic, given the well-documented dialectical interaction which existed then, as now, between language and the concrete social and political practices of the society in which it is embedded (See, for example, Desmet et al (1990), Higgonet (1980), and Lartichaux (1977)).

What we have in Rorty’s account then is a critique (duly disguised in line with his poststructuralist and pragmatist precepts as non-critique) of the notion of language as a medium or representation of reality (1989:19). Rorty’s unargued assumptions concerning the nature of language in fact form a large part of the account we are offered (1989:8-9). As Rorty admits “according to my own precepts, I am not going to offer arguments against the vocabulary I want to replace”(1989:9). Rorty’s attempt to ‘show’ that his particular conception of language is both philosophically and morally preferable without ‘saying’ is, however, ultimately unconvincing.

According to Rorty: “The idea that language has a purpose goes once the idea of language as medium goes”(1989:17). This is, however, an instance of Rorty’s either/or dichotomizing with respect to the issue of the nature of language: Either we subscribe to a conception of the nature of language as inherently representational, or else we must view it as essentially metaphorical and undetermined or constrained by any relation to extra-linguistic reality. Rorty’s line of reasoning seems to be that since we necessarily apprehend the world through language, therefore there can be no matters of fact. Rorty moves, as Geras notes, “from the premiss of language to an inflation of the linguistic which all but obliterates or, better, swallows up the objects of language. It is as though we had no other choice but between such an inflation...and a pure, passive-receptor, blank-sheet empiricism”(1995:114). Rorty’s view forbids recognition of the various ways in which language is constrained by facts (Geras, 1995:114).

This, however, is the opposite of the view of Wittgenstein to whom Rorty claims allegiance. As Wittgenstein points out, “For a *large* class of cases - *though not for all*

- in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language"(PI §43 additional emphasis mine).

Again, contrary to Wittgenstein's point that there are "general facts of nature" which to a large extent constrain what can and cannot be intelligibly asserted (See Wittgenstein, PI §§142,242) Rorty insists that "the world does not tell us what language games to play"(1989:6). According to Rorty: "the human self is created by the use of a vocabulary"(1989:6). However, as Wittgenstein points out: "Certain events would put me into a position in which I could not go on with the old language game any more. In which I was torn away from the sureness of the game. Indeed, doesn't it seem obvious that the possibility of a language-game is conditioned by certain facts?"(1969, §617).

Similarly, Rorty's deployment of the Wittgensteinian metaphor of language as a 'tool' is also questionable (1989:11,13,17). The implied notion here is that vocabularies are simply things which can be picked up and used for any purpose by anyone. A superficial and selective reading of Wittgenstein's thesis of meaning-as-use might lend credence to such a view. However, a more holistic and balanced reading of Wittgenstein's later writings suggests this would be to ignore the whole line of thought underlying the conception of language as a socially-embedded phenomenon.

According to Rorty, "human beings make truths by making languages in which to phrase sentences"(1989:9). Rorty also argues that "To have a meaning is to have a place in a language game"(1989:18). It is significant that here and elsewhere Rorty chooses to refer to the concept of 'language game' rather than 'form of life'(See also Rorty, 1989:7,9). There are two main aspects contained in the notion of a language-game which generate misleading connotations or 'pictures'. Firstly, the term 'language' invites linguistic reductionism; the idea that in language-games the key element is language in and of itself. This is reinforced by the overall 'Bloomian' tenor of Rorty's approach with its emphasis on poetic 'redescription' (See Rorty, 1989:20;28-30). Secondly, the term 'game', considered within the context of Rorty's distinctly anaemic conception of the social, generates the idea of non-seriousness or triviality. Both connotations are of course part of the 'grammar' of the concept

‘language-game’. Problems arise, however, when such notions become reified and regarded as the *essence* of what a language-game is.

As Mounce notes: “According to Rorty, Wittgenstein is one of the three most important philosophers of the century because he has shown how to move from a view of language as representational to a non-representationalist view of language”(1997:219). However, as Mounce rightly points out, “we might begin by noting that Wittgenstein nowhere denies that we represent the world in our use of language. Indeed that we do so is the whole presupposition of his investigation, as much in the later as in the earlier work...Thus it is spurious to make a contrast, as Rorty does, between representation on the one hand and use or function on the other”(1997:219).

As already noted, it is Wittgenstein's view that “For a *large* class of cases - *though not for all* - in which we employ the word ‘meaning’ it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language”(PI §43 additional emphasis mine). A recognition of what I take to be Wittgenstein's implicit delimitation of the meaning-as-use conception of language is therefore potentially significant for any proposed application of the Wittgensteinian perspective to the study of the socio-political for the following reasons. Firstly, this implicit recognition of the role of language as potentially representative of certain objective facts and situations tends to problematise any radical anti-realist reading of Wittgenstein's writings. The point is important insofar as Rorty's account, in common with certain ‘poststructuralist’ or ‘postmodernist’ appropriations of Wittgenstein, is in danger of effectively erecting another equally dangerous and misleading ‘picture’ of language, based this time on an unwarranted generalisation from Wittgenstein's delimited notion of meaning-as-use. Secondly, it brings into question the assumption, common to many of the interpretations and applications of Wittgenstein's writings to the study of the social sciences, that a change solely in our linguistic habits, or a revision of our conceptual repertoire, will be sufficient to break the hold on us of particular ‘pictures’. Such assumptions, in other words, implicitly licence a form of ‘linguistic idealism’. Thirdly, a recognition of Wittgenstein's delimitation of the meaning-as-use conception preserves the notion that the language of political and social theory is

capable of functioning representationally - a conclusion which, as we shall see, is arguably presupposed by Rorty's critique itself with its frequent references to the existence of social exclusion etc (See Rorty, 1989:190-191).

There is, therefore, nothing in the Wittgensteinian conception of 'language as use' to rule out the use of language as a means of representing objective states of affairs. Wittgenstein indeed would have been the first to concede that this is one of the things which humans do with language all the time (See, for example, PI §23). Mounce thus rightly criticises "Rorty's tendency to present alternatives as if they exhausted all the ones available...if we do not hold that truth is a feature of the physical world, quite independent of the human mind, we are obliged to hold that it is a feature of the sentence we have ourselves created. But why should we not hold that it exists in a relation between the two?"(1997:202).

A crucial factor separating a Wittgensteinian from a Rortyan poststructuralist-inspired perspective and its implications consists in the distinction which Wittgenstein draws in his later writings between 'forms of life' and 'language-games', a distinction which, is however, frequently elided in the secondary literature. As the criticisms of commentators such as Hinman (1983), and Emmett (1990) suggest, any radically relativistic or linguistically reductionist reading of Wittgenstein is more easily constructed on the basis of the notion of a language-game as opposed to that of a form of life.

The selective nature of Rorty's reading of Wittgenstein in relation to this issue is evident in the underestimation of the role played in Wittgenstein's later writings as a whole by the notion of language as socially situated. This comes across for example in the stress placed in the *Philosophical Investigations* and elsewhere on the importance of human social practices. As Wittgenstein wrote: "...the term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life"(PI §23). Equally, as will be argued in more detail in section III, it is an emphasis evident in the line of thought underlying such apparently 'epistemological' notions as 'hinge propositions' put forward by Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*.



Rorty's conception of the contingency of language is constructed on the basis of his conflation of the concepts of language-game and form of life and is therefore open to criticism from a Wittgensteinian perspective. This commits Rorty to a variant of linguistic idealism, as highlighted by Rorty's emphasis throughout his writings on the possibility of 'redescription' as applied to the self and social relations (See Rorty, 1989:7,9. See also Mounce, 1997:202-203). As section IV of the study argues in more detail, due to their commitment to a shared underlying conception of the nature of language the theoretical roots of which can be traced to the Saussurean paradigm, this is an idea which animates the writings of other contemporary theorists such as Lyotard (1984), Laclau and Mouffe (1985), and Hall (1988a,1988b, 1988f). The concept of 'redescription' is a key feature of Rorty's writings, but also one which, from a Wittgensteinian perspective, seriously underestimates the role played by concrete social practices in the functioning of language and the role of what Wittgenstein terms 'hinge propositions' within language itself.

### *3.2 The Political Implications of the Contingency of Language*

A number of consequences flow from Rorty's adoption of this assumption. These can be reflected in Rorty's understanding of the role of language within the sphere of the socio-political. It is, for example, Rorty's view that the acceptance of the contingency of language leads in turn to a recognition of the contingency of conscience and represents "a picture of intellectual and moral progress"(1989:9, see also p.16). In addition, according to Rorty: "To drop the idea of languages as representative, and to be thoroughly Wittgensteinian in our approach to language, would be to de-divinize the world" (1989:21).

Of key significance here is Rorty's commitment to a Nietzschean aesthetic of 'irony' and 'play'(see 1989:17,20), and the way in which this in turn conditions his selective reading of Wittgenstein's views on language. As we have already seen, this also manifests itself in an implicit commitment to the sovereignty of language games over form of life and underlies Rorty's stress on the possibility and desirability of redescription. Thus according to Rorty, poets and revolutionaries should seek change only through words, not deeds. We have a reassertion of the linguistic idealist



premise that a change in language is sufficient. As Rorty insists: “to change how we talk is to change how we are”(1989:20). Similarly, the key role ascribed to the ‘ironist poet’ in reducing cruelty (1989:60 *passim*) is a direct corollary of Rorty’s poststructuralist and postmodernist conception of the self and social relations as predominantly linguistic constructs.

Rorty’s perspective and its underlying conception of language results in a serious downplaying of the network of concrete practices which maintain particular conceptions of the subject as well as the social, political and institutional bases of cruelty. As Haber argues: “while Rorty’s position of the ironist is consistent with the [structuralist or semiotically-inspired] claim that we create ourselves out of the tools of language, it fails to note the cultural and social constraints of language”(1994:70). Rorty’s employment of the concept of ‘irony’ is in fact ultimately counterproductive. For it undercuts the commitment necessary to those propositions which require, in Wittgenstein’s words, to ‘stand fast’ if Rorty’s stated liberal aim of reducing or minimising suffering is to be possible.

Similarly, the distance between Rorty and Wittgenstein comes through in the question of the relationship between socialization and language. According to Rorty: “There is nothing to people except what has been socialized into them - their ability to use language, and thereby to exchange beliefs and desires with other people”(Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p.177, quoted in Howarth, 1995:118). It is, however, perfectly possible to agree with Rorty that socialization, as it were, ‘goes all the way down’ without necessarily subscribing to the idealist notion that all there is to such socialization is the formative influence and operation of language. Rather, in line with the perspective of Wittgenstein, human beings can more plausibly be viewed as the product of both language and the network of concrete practices which constitute the society in which they live. Recognition of the latter conception of socialization is absent from Rorty’s account, premised as it is on a predominantly language game level of analysis. One of the central implications is the development of idealist political analyses and prescriptions. A key example of the latter is Rorty’s emphasis on the ever-present possibility and political efficacy of ‘redescription’, whether of the self or of social relations.



In addition to the linguistic idealism of Rorty's perspective there is a recurring ideological theme in the form of the attempt to equate language *qua* human social product, with language *qua* the product equally of *all* human beings regardless of social or economic position. (The same universalist assumptions are also operative in Rorty's frequent references to 'we' intellectuals (1989:3) and to "our language"(1989:16)). The result of Rorty's approach is to depoliticize the social basis and role of language via the fiction that 'we' are all equally empowered shapers and users of language (see, for example, 1989:9,21). Rorty's conception of language thus leads to a reification of the concept of 'community'(See Shapiro, 1992:28). There also arises a spurious egalitarianism with respect to both language and community. As Fraser argues: "Political discourse in fact is restricted by Rorty to those who speak the language of bourgeois liberalism. Whatever departs from that vocabulary simply lacks any sense of solidarity...The adherents of bourgeois liberalism have a monopoly on talk about community needs and social problems. Whoever eschews the liberal idiom must be talking about something else - about, say, individual salvation"(quoted in Haber, 1994:62).

The existence of such a theme again undercuts Rorty's claim to represent an authentic Wittgensteinian approach to language. For one of the key characteristics of the latter is precisely the recognition that language users are socially embedded in a network of concrete practices and institutions. Although Wittgenstein himself for various reasons does not make the point explicit, what his key orientation on language as an irreducibly social phenomenon also arguably entails is that humans are language users, but language users who operate within a context of unequal power relations.

For those such as Rorty who are committed to a thoroughly anti-realist conception of Wittgenstein's perspective on language the latter notion will represent a move too far. If, however, we take into consideration, for example, the historical spread of education and communications in general, it is possible to mount an argument to show that such critical concepts as, for example, the Marxist critique of inequality, or the feminist critique of patriarchy have now, broadly speaking, become part of contemporary human social consciousness; i.e., of what constitutes 'ordinary

language' properly understood. The idea that to speak of language as a socially-embedded phenomenon is also necessarily to recognize its associated dimensions of inequality might also be viewed as an example of a 'hinge proposition' which 'stands fast' for the majority of people. This, I would argue, is a far more authentically Wittgensteinian position than that adopted by Rorty who in an arbitrary and *a priori* fashion (see 1989:8-9 for Rorty's disavowal of the need for argumentation) rules out a whole number of uses of language, one of which is the representation of socio-political states of affairs such as inequality. As Wittgenstein argued, we need to: "make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose..."(PI §304).

This type of recognition is absent from Rorty's account with its implicit reliance on a notion of linguistic equality of access, input, and political efficacy. All of these assumptions are crucial to Rorty's stress on the political relevance and desirability of strategies of redescription. However, as Burr points out: "This view of the person as 'discourse-user' is...a facilitating one. It holds out the possibility of change through personal agency and choice...However, it could be seen as paying insufficient attention to the ways in which the claim to 'voice' are constrained. We do not all have equal 'access' to all discourses. Our class, age, gender, ethnic origin and so on all impose restrictions upon the kind of person we can claim to be..."(1995:93).

In this respect Rorty, along with other advocates of poststructuralism or postmodernism, implicitly subscribes to a version of the Saussurean paradigm of language, i.e., to a conception of language which stresses only the *formal* or *logical* status of its contingency as expressed in the key poststructuralist idea of the arbitrary nature of the signifier. Against the reification of the formal contingency of language and meaning which a solely semiotic conception of language engenders Eagleton makes the point that "meaning may well be ultimately undecideable if we view language contemplatively, as a chain of signifiers on a page; it becomes 'decideable' and words like 'truth', 'reality' 'knowledge', and 'certainty' have something of their force restored to them when we think of language rather as something we do, as indissociably interwoven with our practical forms of life"(*Literary Theory: An Introduction*, p.130, quoted in Sarup, 1993:53). The point is reinforced by

Wittgenstein's example of the 'signpost' and the role played by concrete social practices and institutions in deciding and constraining the contingency of language (see Wittgenstein, PI §§85-86, 198). In contrast to the conception of language found in the Wittgensteinian account, in the writings of theorists such as Rorty we are presented with a one-dimensional and distinctly apolitical conception of language underpinned by the notion of its alleged contingency.

### *3.3 Rorty's Public/Private Dichotomy and the Implications of Wittgenstein's Critique of the Idea of a Private Language*

In Rorty's view, liberalism lies within the public as opposed to the private sphere. According to the logic of Rorty's perspective, with its emphasis on the notion of a public/private dichotomy, philosophy is therefore irrelevant with respect to it. Philosophy only has a place within the sphere of the private. It is here, according to Rorty, that the individual is free to employ philosophy and poetry and thus experiment in an attempt to attain self-perfection and edification (1997:207).

With this notion of a public/private dichotomy, I want to argue, Rorty both implicitly subscribes to and at the same time denies the possibility of, hermetically sealed language games. A key assumption on Rorty's part is that the 'ironist poet' who engages in such forms of experimentation will in due course express and disseminate the results among the community as a whole thus engendering the 'solidarity' Rorty regards as crucial to societies riven by inequality and cruelty (1989:190-191). Yet, in order for the 'ironist poet' to carry out truly autonomous and meaningful forms of experimentation with respect to our thought concerning social relations and institutions the private sphere must somehow be free from 'contamination' by the ideas which are dominant within the sphere of the public.

This, I would argue, commits Rorty to something like the line of thought criticised by Wittgenstein in his discussion of the possibility of a private language (PI §§243-275). As Wittgenstein argues, there can be no such thing as a private individual sphere of language unrelated to language in its wider social setting. If, contrary to Rorty's stated position, the language game of experimentation engaged in by the ironist was solely for the private moral and cultural edification of the latter, there

would be less of a problem. This would correspond to the sort of contingently private language which Wittgenstein allows the possibility of. (Though there would still be the issue of achieving truly autonomous experimentation untainted by the ideas contained in the common store of language and concepts.) Contrary to Rorty's view, what the logic of Wittgenstein's discussion suggests is that the liberal ironist who supposedly is free to experiment and to redescribe without restriction will in actual fact be 'experimenting' within the parameters laid down by the public language of the liberal capitalist society within which he or she has been socialised.

A Wittgensteinian perspective, supported by an extrapolation of the underlying logic of the anti-private language argument, thus serves as a critique of the implicit individualism of theorists such as Rorty. For while Rorty apparently embraces on the one hand a poststructuralist/postmodernist conception of language with its corollary of the alleged demise of the self, he nevertheless implicitly relies on and eulogises the idea of an autonomous and artistically creative individual - the 'ironist poet' - whose 'redescriptive' and 'edifying' practices actually presuppose a separation of the private from the public realm.

As Haber argues: "...if we agree to the poststructuralist theory of the self and language - a theory which, I would argue, is politically useful even if it cannot be metaphysically defined - then we must also agree to the thesis that the private sphere and the cultural sphere which includes the 'private' cannot be delineated. Both the private and the public are political constructs"(1994:61). Yet Rorty's account inconsistently relies on the notion of a separation of the two spheres.

In terms of the particular conception of the language/societal relationship it presupposes, Rorty's favoured notion of the ironist poet or intellectual is a highly problematic one. As Haber points out: "We would do well to question how, to what extent, or even whether the artist is able to escape the hegemony of culture"(1994:55). It is also questionable whether, as Rorty's account presupposes, the poet or ironist is actually in the epistemological position of being able to view the world from the standpoint of those marginalized. This is a significant weakness in the Rortyan perspective which claims this as a possible and important role (See Rorty, 1989:61). In contrast to the implications which flow from the Rortyan perspective on

language, the authentic linguistic representation of individuals and their circumstances, it can be argued, necessarily requires some form of participation in, and understanding of, the practices of the particular form of life concerned. Where this is not achieved, the language employed by the Rortyan ironist or poet in an attempt to engender 'solidarity' would, from a Wittgenstein perspective, merely be 'idling' from the point of view of the marginalized in society (See Wittgenstein, PI §132).

'Solidarity', according to Rorty's reading of the concept, is effected via the role played by the ironist poet. However, as Haber argues: "...why should we be comfortable believing that the poet's version of oppression, cruelty, pain and suffering really speak to the experience of the victims"(1994:55).

Rorty's reading of the notion of 'solidarity' is therefore one which stands in contrast to that found in both the social-democratic and Marxist traditions, where the notion is underpinned by a conception of language which makes possible the identification of objective social forces and the collaborative role of historical agents within and against such forces. Due, however, to the nature of Rorty's poststructuralist-inspired philosophy of language this conception of solidarity is denied. As a result, the notion of solidarity which we find in Rorty's writings is an individualistic and highly aestheticized version unsuited to the tasks of social critique or transformation.

The public/private dichotomy which is such a key feature of Rorty's writings thus contradicts his stated commitment to the notion of language as a human cultural and social vocabulary (1989:21-21;53, *passim*). The purpose of Rorty's positing of the public/private dichotomy is to allow for the possibility of both ironism and liberalism. It represents, in other words, a sphere for the experimentation and safe containment of ironism. Rorty's argument fails, however, for liberalism is itself an ideological theory and therefore should, according to the logic of Rorty's own argument, be confined to the sphere of the private. This, however, is patently not the case in contemporary capitalist society. Recognition of the underlying political significance of this point reinforces Wittgenstein's argument concerning the impossibility of a private language. It also emphasises further the links between

language and the social practices of the form of life within which it is necessarily embedded.

Other serious political implications stem from Rorty's posited dichotomy. Chief among these perhaps is the fact that potentially critical disciplines such as political theory are assigned as a result of Rorty's public/private dichotomy to the sphere of the private; the public sphere, in Rorty's view, being concerned solely with policy decisions. The result of Rorty's public/private dichotomy is thus to ensure the inadmissibility and emasculation of critical theory, which along with philosophy in general, would be confined to the latter sphere. As Haber points out: "This means there can be no philosophers of public life; the sole use of ironist theory is private: to aid in the novel creation of self-images"(1994:60).

Rorty's assumption of a private self also "neglects the political dimensions of the self, since...that thesis which insists that the self is culturally or socially constructed cannot ignore the fact that the cultural and the social are themselves constructed within the stakes of power"(Haber, 1994:61). As Haber points out, "Classical liberalism, which Rorty speaks for, refuses to see those actions it considers private as being power-laden, political"(1994:62). In concrete political terms Rorty's dichotomy thus ensures the continued dominance of the status quo through a fundamental delimitation of the sphere of the political. The notion, as we have seen, is also open to serious philosophical objections from a source the insights of which Rorty elsewhere claims to be developing and applying, namely, the later writings of Wittgenstein on language.

Despite the expressed allegiance to a Wittgensteinian perspective, the particular conception of language with which he operates suggests that Rorty has in effect implicitly resurrected the notion of 'philosophy' and 'philosophers' - albeit this time in the guise of 'ironist poets' - together with the idea of one form of language (in this case poetic redescription) as supposedly superior - all ideas which Wittgenstein devoted so much of his writings to criticising. The resulting elitism is a product of the idealist implications generated by Rorty's particular conception of language.

One important effect of this is the overlooking or devaluing of the sphere of ordinary language as a critical resource potentially open to all language users, whether 'ironist



poets' or proletarians. It is, for example, Rorty's view that: "In the ideal liberal society, the intellectuals would still be ironists, though non-intellectuals would not"(1989:18, quoted in Haber, 1994:53). As West notes: "This is another reason why Rorty's views can be considered elitist. An intellectually informed person is much more likely to speak out than those less well educated. To make this work would require a restructuring of society to truly afford and encourage equality for all"(quoted in Topper, 1995:965).

In his notion of the 'ironist poet' Rorty also transgresses on the supposed sovereignty and inviolability of the language games which he elsewhere insists on. In this respect Rorty's conception of a private sphere of experimentation is vulnerable to the various objections brought to bear on Mill's 'harm principle' and its presupposition of a 'self-regarding' sphere of action.

### *3.4 Wittgensteinian Pragmatics Versus Rorty's Conception of Language*

For Rorty, as we have seen, truth is conceived as a property of sentences. Sentences in turn are dependent on vocabularies which are the product of human beings (1989:21). Rorty's line of reasoning may, on one level, be considered unobjectionable. This is, however, also a distinctly apolitical and asocial conception and formulation of the point. This is evident, in particular, when consideration is given to the social matrix of power relations within which the formulation, dissemination and maintenance of vocabularies takes place. Truth, for Rorty, is supposedly a 'contextual' question. The crucial issue, however, is which particular conception of 'context' is operative in Rorty's writings. Examination of the latter reveals the notion of language to be a structuralist conception which radically underplays or omits entirely the socially-embedded nature of language. It is, Rorty's claims of fidelity notwithstanding, a conception of language which further distances Rorty's writings from those of Wittgenstein.

In addition to the inspiration which his perspective as a whole draws from the Deweyan and Jamesian traditions of pragmatism, Rorty also characterises his conception of language as a 'pragmatic' one (1989:9). This is closely tied to Rorty's focus on the uses to which language can be put. There are, however, some important



links between pragmatics and the later perspective of Wittgenstein, and these are significant as a critique of the Saussurean paradigm of language as expressed in the writings of Rorty.

The development of pragmatics can be viewed in large part as a reaction to the 'syntacticism' of the Chomskyan school of linguistics (Mey, 1997:417). More importantly from our point of view, pragmatics as a social-critical tendency can also be located within the school of ordinary language philosophy (Mey, 1997:418). As Cohen points out, ordinary language philosophy "provided the first fruitful system of ideas for the foundations of pragmatics"(1997:36). The crucial point is that, "in pragmatics, the language user is at the center [sic] of attention...*the user being a member of a particular human society, such a theory should encompass everything that characterizes the user as a societal being*"(1997:423, emphasis added).

However, Rorty argues, contrary to the whole thrust of pragmatics, that truth and meaning are merely the products of sentences (Rorty, 1989:5,7). Pragmatics, on the other hand, is concerned above all with the study of language as it is actually used. It is, in other words, a perspective that involves focusing on not merely the sentence as does Rorty, but the wider contextual setting comprising the institutional and power relations that exist between the participants concerned.

In line with Wittgenstein's orientation towards the social "A truly pragmatic [perspective] has to deal with the context as a user's context"(Cohen, 1997:424). In this way pragmatics represents "the study of language in a human context of use"(1997:425). As Mey points out: "Language use is the process by which people communicate, for various purposes, using linguistic means. *This process is governed by the conditions of society, inasmuch as these conditions determine the user's access to, and control of, those means. Hence, pragmatics can also be described as a societally oriented and societally bound linguistics*"(1997:425 emphasis added).

The notion of linguistic pragmatics therefore stands in contrast to Rorty's structuralist and poststructuralist-inspired conception of language. For the perspective of pragmatics focuses on language conceived as an irreducibly social phenomenon with all that such a perspective entails in terms of a recognition of the various inequalities that exist within the linguistic context properly conceived. In this

respect, the view of language underlying pragmatics is closely linked to the approach of ordinary language philosophy, in particular, that of speech act theory. As Ricoeur points out: "...the semantics of the English-language philosophers, which is a semantics of discourse, finds itself from the start in the territory of denotation, even when it is discussing words. This is because for it, words, as parts of discourse, are equally carriers of a part of the denotation"(1986:124).

Pragmatics is therefore also closely linked to the Wittgensteinian perspective. As Wittgenstein points out: "...it is our acting which lies at the bottom of our language-game"(1969:§24, p.28). The link between Wittgenstein's later writings and pragmatics is recognised by Cohen who notes: "Wittgenstein's recommendation to ask for the use of a word, not its meaning, tended to blur the difference between semantic and pragmatic issues..."(1997:36). As Genova argues: "Instead of turning to the human mind to explain the functioning of language, Wittgenstein turns to the pragmatics of language, i.e., to all the practices that surround the use of a method of representation which he calls a 'language-game'"(1995:150). The connection between Wittgenstein and pragmatics is a natural one when we consider, for example, that the central critical or persuasive purpose behind Wittgenstein's deployment of the 'language-as-game' analogy is to illustrate that language is a social activity rather than an abstract system – it is, in an important sense, *parole* rather than *langue* (PI §§ 19;23).

As Wittgenstein's account emphasises, the notion of a form of life involves not merely language, but also the concrete practices and institutions which go to make up the society concerned, all of which to varying degrees, constrain the use of language. The holistic, anti-reductionist, and anti-idealistic treatment of language entailed in the concept of a form of life is something that is shared by the perspectives of Wittgenstein and Marx. As Easton notes: "For Marx and Wittgenstein we understand phenomena by examining their interrelationships within a totality...For Marx the mode of production was the framework within which all other features of social life could be explained and is therefore analogous to Wittgenstein's notion of a form of life"(1983:77).

There is at least one other reason why a pragmatic perspective is also an authentically Wittgensteinian perspective. This follows from the fact that the split between theoretical linguistics on the one hand and pragmatics or applied linguistics on the other is mirrored in the fundamental reorientation which takes place in Wittgenstein's writings between the early view of language as a 'calculus', and the later perspective on language 'use', and thus on language as an irreducibly social phenomenon.

Words of course have meaning through their use in sentences. However, the latter - and this is a point whose significance is seriously underestimated or ignored in Rorty's writings - only have meaning as a part of those speech acts and accompanying practices which Wittgenstein refers to as a 'form of life'. As Wittgenstein points out: "To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique"(PI §199). As we already noted, Wittgenstein stresses that: "...the term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life"(PI §23).

## Chapter 4

### **The Underlying Conception of Language in Lyotard's Writings**

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#### *4.1 Lyotard's Interpretation of the Notion of 'Language Games'*

This chapter investigates some of the main issues raised by Lyotard's writings. This involves, in particular, an outline of the main themes of Lyotard's writings on political theory which derive support from a particular conception of language, and an investigation of whether these are valid themes worth supporting, and whether they might still be argued for using an alternative (Wittgensteinian) conception of language.

We should begin by mentioning what is undoubtedly one of the most significant examples of the socio-political appropriation of Wittgenstein's writings, namely, Lyotard's reading of Wittgenstein's concept of 'language games'. According to Lyotard: "I chose language games as my general methodological approach. I am not claiming that the entirety of social relations is of this nature – that will remain an open question"(1984:15). It will, however, be argued in what follows that Lyotard's initial choice of methodological approach effectively closes the question of his conception and treatment of the nature of social relations.

As already noted in our discussion of Rorty, the 'language game' versus 'form of life' considerations, in particular the argument against the implicit or explicit equation of both notions, is of crucial importance and is one which will be advanced and developed in more detail in sections III and IV of the study. Nevertheless, the main lines of criticism advanced in the case of Rorty also apply to the underlying problematic in Lyotard's account of language and need not therefore be rehearsed in detail at this stage. The central point of criticism, however, is that Lyotard's writings illustrate once again the consequences both theoretical and political which flow from

an implicit acceptance of a brand of linguistic idealism. As in the case of Rorty, it will be argued that the problematic dimensions of Lyotard's account stem from a fundamentally asocial conception of language which awards primacy to the notion of language games conceived in isolation from the constraints represented by the concept of a form of life.

#### *4.2 Lyotard: The Concept of 'Terror'*

In Wittgensteinian terms, a 'picture' of what all language *must* be like can be shown to motivate the moral and political perspective of a good deal of Lyotard's writings. The fact that the essence of language, for Lyotard, is conceived in terms of a differential sign system entails the twin theses that language is, firstly, something radically undetermined with respect to the fixity of signification or semantic reference and, secondly, that any such forms of phrasing or linkage oriented towards the achievement of such reference, must necessarily represent the exclusion and suppression of difference.

Thus a key assumption running throughout Lyotard's writings is that any attempt to achieve consensus is must necessarily be founded on, or result in, what he terms 'terror'(Lyotard, 1984:xxiv;63-64). Lyotard's perspective thus questions the key Habermasian assumption "that the goal of dialogue is consensus"(Lyotard, 1984:65). A particular conception of language generates in turn moral and political prescriptions. According to Lyotard: "We must thus arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus"(Lyotard, 1984:66). This is, however, a one-dimensional, and - given Lyotard's reliance on his writings - a distinctly un-Wittgensteinian, reading of the notion of 'consensus'. As suggested, what drives Lyotard's argument is a conception, or better a 'picture', of what language games *must* be like. The fact that Lyotard views language-games as radically heterogeneous and incommensurable determines his negative conception of the concept of consensus.

The universal and imperative nature of the insistence on the segregation of language games is also problematic given Lyotard's commitment to a postmodern perspective. As Haber argues, Lyotard's position here "might itself be seen as a mark

of terror”(1994:38). Haber makes the equally important political point that: “The thesis of the autonomy (sovereignty) of language games does not allow us...to consider the thesis of the ubiquity of power, viz., that power may in fact already impede on many spheres other than the one specific to the game of prescription”(1994:38). As Haber’s point suggests, there are strong arguments in favour of the view that the concept of power is more adequately conceived ‘holistically’. To state the point in Wittgensteinian terms, what this suggests is that the notion of ‘power’, since it is a concept which entails both language and concrete social practices, is more adequately conceived on the basis of a form of life perspective, i.e., a perspective which does not sanction the notion of a hermetically sealed and compartmentalised sphere of the linguistic, as Lyotard’s reading of language games tends to do. The significance ascribed to the thesis of the autonomy of language games in Lyotard’s writings thus represents an important point of critical focus from a Wittgensteinian perspective.

We should also note the potentially reactionary implications of Lyotard’s commitment to the notion that ‘terror’ is inextricably linked with any and all forms of ‘closure’, i.e., with any attempted definition of the terms and concepts which might be required in order to describe, explain or criticise developments or phenomena within the sphere of the socio-political. As Haber correctly points out: “...we may not want to be sanguine about the thesis that the meaning of Stalin cannot be fixed in any morally determinate way or that a debate about the virtues of fascism is merely a matter of opinion”(1994:18).

There is also at least one further consideration as to why, despite protestations to the contrary, theorists such as Lyotard and Rorty are logically committed to an anti-reductionist ‘form of life’ rather than a ‘language-game’ conception of language. This stems from the fact that in the contemporary sphere of the socio-political, the hegemonic strategies which such theorists invariably award primacy to in their writings, are directed towards the disarticulation and rearticulation of key signifiers such as ‘democracy’ or ‘freedom’ and as such these strategies necessarily require to be intentionally universal in applicability or scope rather than confined to particular language games.

### 4.3 Lyotard and the Concept of 'Paralogy'

So far we have focused on Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*. writings in *The Differend* are more concerned with the analysis of justice and its related socio-political problems. All of these topics, however, are again governed by an underlying philosophy of language. This is illustrated, for example, in Lyotard's notion of the 'linking of phrases'.

According to Lyotard, the struggle over the 'linking of phrases' represents the fundamentally strategic and agonistic nature of language which is viewed by Lyotard in terms of a contest between competing phrases. Lyotard's account is concerned in particular with the deconstructing or destabilising of those current 'phrase regimens' which, in Lyotard's view, necessarily silence or suppress the standpoint or voice of the Other, or difference. The notion of the 'differend' thus represents, for Lyotard, the reification of a particular linkage of phrases which has come to be viewed as 'natural'. They have become in Lyotard's terminology 'phrase regimens'. The concept denoted in *The Postmodern Condition* by the term 'language games' thus changes in Lyotard's later writings to that of 'phrase regimens'. According to Haber: "This replacement represents an advanced awareness (sophistication) in Lyotard's theory. He realized that the terminology of language games can be taken to suggest transcendental subjectivity - a subject which uses language, but exists at some point outside of it, determining its use"(Haber 1994:136,n12). Haber's positive evaluation of the significance and status of the change notwithstanding, what this actually demonstrates is the further semiotization of Lyotard's politics, and as such marks a further point of retreat from a Wittgensteinian conception of language.

The notion of the 'differend' with its theme of the reification of a particular linkage of phrases shares in some respects certain parallels with the Wittgensteinian idea of the 'pictures' occasionally transmitted and perpetuated as a result of the misunderstanding of the uses of language (PI §§110-115). One key difference, however, is that in the Wittgensteinian account there is arguably an indissoluble link implicitly posited between the maintenance of 'pictures' and the practices of a particular form of life. This is perhaps the line of thought suggested in, for example, Wittgenstein's injunction that we always ask: "What kind of actions accompany



these words?...In what scenes will they be used; and what for?" (PI §§489). It is at one, in other words, with the Wittgensteinian perspective on the interrelated nature of language and social practices.

With respect to this issue, Engel (1975) notes the existence of what he terms "two wings" of the analytic school of philosophy, both of whom have in various ways expressed their indebtedness to Wittgenstein on the topic of language and bewitchment. In the case of the 'linguistic wing' there is the view that the trouble stems merely from the confusion generated by language. On the other hand, the 'clinical wing' have argued "that what doomed philosophers to speak nonsense was something deeply psychological. This manifests itself in language and can be approached in this manner, but it was not something strictly or simply linguistic"(1975:11). Section III of this study will argue for a rejection of both poles of the dichotomy outlined by Engels, since both alternatives stand in stark contrast to the sustained emphasis on the *social* context of human language use which forms such an essential part of the Wittgensteinian perspective. This finds expression, as already suggested, in the critique of the notion of a private language, and in the focus on the significance of human social practices in the learning and maintenance of language games and the forms of life of which they are part.

Recognition of this point strengthens the analysis of those who view Wittgenstein as more than a merely 'linguistic' philosopher. The whole orientation of the Wittgensteinian perspective, in other words, suggests that we should be willing to look 'outside' of language itself in order to obtain a fuller understanding of the possible reasons why it 'goes on holiday', or 'bewitches' or why, to put the point in Lyotard's terminology, particular 'phrase regimens' arise and remain in place. This line of thought ties in with the analysis of Rossi-Landi (1968;1975) who refers to the phenomenon of 'linguistic alienation', a notion which, in contrast to the approach of both Engel and Lyotard, directs attention outside the sphere of the merely psychological or linguistic and towards the sphere of the social. The line of thought being outlined here represents another element in the process of developing more fully what can be regarded as the 'intimations' of Wittgenstein's thought and their significance for our understanding of the social and political. We are, as certain

commentators, following Wittgenstein, suggest we must, taking a 'wider look around' and going beyond Wittgenstein in order to fully understand his significance. According to Lyotard, 'paralogy' is the weapon wielded by the 'pagan' political theorist in order to counter any forms of 'totalizing' and 'terror'. Again, it is a notion whose philosophical origins can be found in the poststructuralist radicalization of the Saussurean paradigm, with its commitment to the idea of the radical instability of any definitive signification. In political and ethical terms, paralogy as a strategy functions, according to Lyotard, through the encouragement of the pluralism which stems from the constant re-envisioning of alternative ideas and views of both society and the individual. Paralogy thus represents Lyotard's commitment to the notions of otherness, pluralism and difference.

The notion of the 'linking of phrases' with the ever-present possibility of the infinite redescription of both the self and social relations which it entails is further evidence of Lyotard's commitment to poststructuralist principles, and in particular to the tendency throughout his writings to universalise the notion of 'difference'. In line with the Saussurean paradigm of language as a synchronic and purely differential system of signs, the essence of language, and ultimately of social relations, is for Lyotard, *difference*. What this means is that any and all forms of structuring or definition premised on what Lyotard refers to as 'denotative utterances' (1984:64-65) which would, however temporarily, limit what Lyotard takes to be the infinite play of signification must be deemed an act of 'terror'(1984:81). Lyotard's pagan politics, together with the key notion of 'paralogism', is therefore dependent on a conception of language which stresses the notion of difference and as such is committed to the questioning and undermining of all existing phrases.

However, the very possibility of any alternative or revised phrase linkages which are to be other than instantly transitory seems itself to depend on the assumption that some linkages will, in Wittgensteinian terms, 'stand fast' (See, 1969: §§341, 343,655). As in the case of Rorty, this, however, is precisely what is ruled out by Lyotard's commitment to the poststructuralist view of language. It is a conception of language antithetical to the formulation of a credible political theory, as well as to an

analysis and organisation of those conditions and relations necessary for effective strategies of critical resistance.

The concept of paralogy is thus a crucial albeit problematic one for Lyotard's project. Paralogy in Lyotard's view represents the process whereby the challenging or undermining of particular dominant paradigms in various spheres takes place, and is closely associated with the poststructuralist idea of the inherent instability of meaning and reference. In this way the concept of paralogy, as we have seen, forms the basis of what Lyotard considers to be his anti-authoritarianism, and his commitment to 'pluralism' and 'otherness'. It also underlies his emphasis on the necessity of small, as opposed to grand, narratives.

Lyotard recognises the political and ethical problems posed by the relativistic implications of a commitment to paralogy. As Haber notes: "Despite various statements to the contrary, he is uncomfortable with politics being founded on opinion"(1994:34). There are some clear links between Lyotard's particular conception of language and its implications in terms of the structure and content of his political theory. In particular, a range of uncomfortable conclusions flow from Lyotard's privileging of a language game level of analysis and the anti-realist implications which this generates. This in turn is a powerful motivating factor behind Lyotard's recourse to a form of Kantianism adopted in an attempt to offset the relativism generated by his perspective on language.

#### 4.4 *Lyotard's Theory of Justice*

This conception of language also underpins Lyotard's notion of justice. As noted above, in Lyotard's view, language games in effect represent 'sovereign' and incommensurable realms. This view is in turn reflected in Lyotard's conception of justice as context-dependent and thus relative to particular language games (See Haber, 1994:26-35).

The notion of justice conceived in terms of a multiplicity of sovereign language games each of which has the freedom to construct its own narratives is, for Lyotard, the only defence against the 'terror' which, in line with his poststructuralist conception of language, is represented by the imposition of any and all forms of

‘closure’ ‘metanarrative’ or ‘totalization’. However, Lyotard is also forced to recognise that this implies the need for some form of universal prescriptive to the effect that the particular conception of justice operative within each language game is something which should be respected. To this extent Lyotard’s commitment to the radical heterogeneity of language games and difference and to the universal imperative required for the protection of the latter involves him in a performative contradiction.

Lyotard’s theory of justice also arguably fails to address some fundamental political realities such as the domination of certain strategically significant language games as well as the unequal character of the power relations within which such language games operate. The failure is not, however, merely contingent one. Due to the underlying conception of language it is, rather, one of a range of issues which Lyotard’s perspective is conceptually unable to address. Thus, in line with the liberal conception which it has pretensions towards displacing, Lyotard’s theory of justice is ultimately of a merely formal variety. As a result of the poststructuralist and overwhelmingly semiotic conception of language which it embraces, it is unable to formulate or to address the issues of injustice and inequality both of which presuppose leaving open the possibility of language functioning representationally, or in what Lyotard would term a ‘denotative’ and ultimately ‘terroristic’ manner.

Consequently, a key problem with Lyotard’s conception of justice is that the latter, along with morality in general, as Haber notes, “becomes a matter of the dominance of the strongest voice”(1994:31). According to Lyotard: “There is no politics of reason...we must do with a politics of opinion”(quoted in Haber, 1994:17). This stems again from Lyotard’s notion of language which, with its commitment to ‘otherness’ and ‘plurality’, grants validity to all forms of language use or ‘phrase linkages’ but only on condition that none claim any privileged right to the depiction of reality. There is therefore an inherent conservatism associated with Lyotard’s notion of ‘pagan politics’ - a feature which it shares with Rorty’s notion of ‘redescription’ - and which is demonstrated, as already suggested, by the fact that it is conceptually unable to address the point that not all language games or their participants are equally empowered. Lyotard’s assumption of the heterogeneous and

isolated nature of language games can also be viewed as abstract and improbable when compared with the realities of modern society. Lyotard's atomistic conception of 'social space' (more accurately, one conceived along the lines of an essentially semiotic sphere) is a direct consequence of his privileging of the notion of language games in isolation from any sort of form of life considerations.

#### 4.5 Lyotard's Notion of 'Solidarity'

Lyotard's political writings are thus dominated by a 'picture' of language which, in true poststructuralist fashion, views it as a radically and infinitely undetermined phenomenon. As a result of this 'picture' Lyotard universalises the notion of difference and the subsequent ethical and political prescriptions which it licences across all spheres of language use. Such an extrapolation, however, represents just the sort of 'totalizing' assumption which Lyotard criticises elsewhere, and which forms the basis for his critique of the role of 'metanarratives', whether in the field of science, history or politics, as 'terroristic'.

As Haber notes: "The problem with Lyotard's view is that it assumes that consensus must necessarily be a mark of terror. But it could also be a mark of genuine agreement"(1994:38). This, I would argue, stands as a further example of Lyotard's distance from an authentically Wittgensteinian conception of language. For what Lyotard effectively does with his construal of the notion of 'consensus' is precisely one of those things which Wittgenstein's later philosophy of language is concerned to question and to discourage, namely, a dogmatic assumption of the univocality of meaning (1969a:17-18; PI §104).

While it is a view effectively ruled out *a priori* by Lyotard's commitment to a poststructuralist conception of language, the notion of solidarity is nevertheless a fundamental presupposition for the possibility of the empowerment of individuals and groups in society. This is an important point since Lyotard's perspective, at least on one level, lays great store by the notion of the defence of 'pluralism'(1984:xxv). However, as Haber argues, the notion of pluralism is itself one which requires a sense of self-identity, which in turn requires that the individual is able to identify with others (1994:43). This, however, is precisely what is denied by the particular

conception of language which underlies Lyotard's political theory. As we have seen, the 'closure' or 'consensus' which would, however temporarily, be required for the establishment of such relations of solidarity are classified in line with Lyotard's poststructuralist view of language as 'terroristic'(Lyotard, 1984:63;91). And yet, as Haber correctly points out: "Without solidarity we are powerless not only to effect change, but even to have a critical sense of ourselves as beings constructed within matrices of power"(1994:43).

Lyotard's view of language games as radically heterogeneous, stems from awarding primacy to language games over the concept of a form of life. However, a recognition that language games are not necessarily the isolated and incommensurable islands depicted in Lyotard's writings undercuts the philosophical basis of his notion of 'terror' which is viewed as the enforcement of conformity or totality on that which, Lyotard argues, is naturally heterogeneous. A Wittgensteinian perspective thus opens up the required space for the development of the key concept of solidarity. The key notion of 'terror' in Lyotard's writings only assumes its theoretical and organisational significance given Lyotard's unargued commitment to a semiotic view of the self, language, and social relations.

#### 4.6 *Lyotard's Kantianism*

The commitment to the notion of sovereign and incommensurable language games combined with Lyotard's subsequent recourse to a form of ethical Kantianism generates, as we have seen, the problem of performative contradiction. As Haber notes: "Lyotard wants to combine a radical commitment to otherness with a universalistic principle of constraint"(1994:35). Thus the imperative of the defence of the sovereignty of language games leads Lyotard to the recognition that "There is a transcendence of justice"(Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, p.69, quoted in Haber, 1994:35). Lyotard, in other words, has to concede the return of the ideas of totality and unity which his whole perspective initially characterised as 'terroristic'. Thus Lyotard recognises, but has no effective solution for, the relativistic problems which are posed by his commitment to a poststructuralist conception of language; a conception



which in turn generates the aestheticization which characterises his notion of ‘pagan’ politics.

As far as the concept of justice is concerned, the particular nature of the problem posed by this, as Lyotard acknowledges, is that: “Aesthetic judgements allow the discrimination of that which pleases from that which does not please. With justice, we have to do, of necessity, with the regulation of something else”(Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, p.90, quoted in Haber, 1994:37). According to Haber: “[Lyotard’s] ‘paganism’ gives way to Kantianism because he remains stuck within the old framework”(1994:7), i.e., a framework which fears the consequences of the unbridled relativism engendered by Lyotard’s commitment to a poststructuralist conception of language.

The problems which characterise Lyotard’s project serve to underline the point that any credible and viable model of politics, together with the possibility of the critique and possible transcendence of relations of oppression and inequality, presupposes the ability to formulate at both a theoretical and practical level the possibility of relations of consensus and solidarity. However, for Lyotard, the underlying conception of language is one which determines *a priori* that consensus is automatically construed in terms of ‘terror’, repression, and the marginalization of the Other (1984:xxiv). Lyotard’s ultimate reliance on a Kantian perspective thus represents an attempt to counter what he senses are the unacceptably relativistic implications of his ‘politics of difference’. As Haber points out, Lyotard appears to be searching for “an Idea of justice over and above the multiplicity of justices”(1994:47). This suggests a fundamental, though ultimately unresolved, degree of misgiving on the part of Lyotard with respect to the previously held notion of allegedly autonomous language games.

#### 4.7 Lyotard, Language and Agonistics

The very articulation of the notion of a postmodern condition itself presupposes the very type of ‘metanarrative’ which Lyotard wishes elsewhere to criticise. To this extent, as Jameson notes: “*The Postmodern Condition*...becomes itself a symptom of the state it seeks to diagnose”(Intro to Lyotard, 1984:xi). Also, the recourse to so-



called metanarratives is still necessary in order to enunciate the inequalities which are inextricably linked with the imposition, organisation and operation of particular language games. In Wittgensteinian terms, certain 'hinge propositions' require to 'stand fast' in order for others to be questioned.<sup>10</sup> And yet one of the key problems of Lyotard's perspective is that if you: "Take away the legitimacy of any grand narratives...what you have left can only be difference"(Haber, 1994:18).

As noted above, Lyotard indeed recognises some of the relativistic problems and the concrete political implications posed by his commitment to paralogy and the denial of the legitimacy of any and all metanarratives: As Lyotard admits: "This is where there is an essential political problem...rule by convention would require that one accept, let's get to the bottom of things right away, even Nazism...This is obviously very troublesome"(quoted in Haber, 1994:25). As suggested, this sort of recognition leads on to the development of Lyotard's Kantianism in an attempt to try and constrain the relativism which stems from the conception of 'pagan' politics, which itself is dictated by Lyotard's commitment to a poststructuralist view of language. It is because of this particular conception of language, with its equation of any form of definition or 'closure' with 'terror', that Lyotard is attracted to Kant's *Third Critique*; in particular, to the idea that we are able to judge without criteria (Haber, 1994:32).

According to Lyotard: "There is no politics if there is not at the very center [sic] of society...a questioning of existing institutions, a project to improve them, to make them more just. This means that all politics implies prescriptions of doing something else than what is"(Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, p.23, quoted in Haber, 1994:16). Fundamental political problems, however, are again generated by Lyotard's commitment to the poststructuralist, semiotic conception of language and the self. The notion of political agency essential to any project of socio-political critique and reconstruction is antithetical to the idea expressed throughout Lyotard's writings of a fragmented, decentred and linguistically constituted self. As a result, Lyotard's conception of politics struggles to escape the realm of purely aesthetic judgements since it lacks a notion of language allowing the formulation of political judgements concerning that which is just or unjust.

As argued, Lyotard's conception of language reifies the notion of 'difference'. This leads to the conclusion that any form of linkage is necessarily viewed as a victory of one form of language use over another. This accounts for Lyotard's view that language is inherently conflictual in nature and is reflected in turn in Lyotard's stress on the notions of 'agonistics' and 'paralogy'. Lyotard, for example, refers to "the first principle underlying our method as a whole: to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing, and speech acts fall within the domain of general agonistics" (1984:10). Lyotard also refers to "This idea of an agonistics of language"(1984:11). The concept of difference expressed in Lyotard's Saussurean-inspired conception of language thus finds its correlate in his political writings in the form of a commitment to the alleged centrality of agonistics in what Lyotard considers to be 'social' relations, and to the strategy of paralogy as the only defence against the 'terror' of closure.

However, despite the politically realist connotations of the terminology, Lyotard subscribes to an impoverished conception of what constitutes an 'agonistics of language'. What is missing in Lyotard's account is an adequate recognition of those practices and forms of unequal relations which constitute its social context. By contrast, it can be argued that an adequate understanding of the notion of 'conflict' requires at the very least that the latter be properly contextualised and grasped as a socially-embedded phenomenon. The conception of 'conflict' expressed in Lyotard's writings, however, is of a strictly semiotic nature i.e., a notion premised on a view of language with no recognition of the fundamental inequalities associated with its operation as an irreducibly social phenomenon.

Just as Lyotard's commitment to a 'picture' of language in line with the Saussurean paradigm conditions his view of the nature of conflict or 'agonistics', so it also fundamentally determines his conception of resistance which is viewed in essentially semiotic terms. As Callinicos argues: "Lyotard's talk of 'activating the differences'...represents a depoliticisation, one might also say an aestheticization, of resistance. The production - no, even the consumption - of Postmodern art counts as resistance. The term has ceased to possess any connotation of political struggle - a convenient enough shift for the readers and auditors of this discourse, who may now sample the benefits of commodity fetishism without a twinge of guilt"(1990:114).

Lyotard's aestheticization of resistance stands as an illustration of the essentially semiotic and hence socially impoverished conception of the latter. As in the case of Rorty, there is a consequent valorising of the notion of infinite redescription. Thus according to Lyotard: "In the ordinary use of discourse...The war is not without rules, *but the rules allow and encourage the greatest possible flexibility of utterance*"(1984:17, emphasis added). In both cases, there is an overestimation of the possibility of redescription and a conceptual blindness to the inequalities of language considered as a social phenomenon.

#### 4.8 Lyotard and the Saussurean Paradigm: *The Social as Semiotic*

As this chapter has sought to illustrate, the key features generated by Lyotard's commitment to the Saussurean paradigm of language and its later radical appropriation by poststructuralist and postmodernist theorists are reflected in the view of the self and the social as linguistic constructs, and thus as fragmented, incomplete and decentred. It is also evident in the notion of the incommensurability of language games, and in the view that only paralogy and agonistics represent authentic models of social relations. As Haber argues, such features "only make sense against their backgrounds – which in this case is semiology and structuralism"(1994:10). As Haber points out: "The postmodern theorist begins from the assumption that the structure of language radically determines our lives as human/social subjects. But 'language' is here being conceived on the structuralist model...Lyotard understands human reality as being irreducibly mediated by language where language is understood as the differential system described by Saussure and amended by Derrida"(1994:14).

In what has been referred to above as the 'semiotic' conception of language the key focus of attention is on the operation of signs in the chain of signification. Thus, according to Saussure: "A linguistic system is a series of differences of sound combined with a series of differences of ideas". In this way, for Saussure, "language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others"(quoted in Haber, 1994:11). The concepts of 'arbitrariness' and 'difference' are two of the central notions imparted by

the Saussurean paradigm of language and which are taken up and radicalised by poststructuralist and postmodernist theorists. In both the latter perspectives the principle of difference and the conception of language as a differential network on which it rests implies there can be no 'author' and no origin of meaning. There thus arises the archetypal poststructuralist notion of the decentring of the self (Lyotard, 1984:xxiv).

According to Lyotard: "...in a society whose communication component is becoming more prominent day by day, both as a reality and as an issue, it is clear that language assumes a new importance"(1984:16). This sort of recognition, however, leads to Lyotard's view that: "The social subject itself seems to dissolve in this dissemination of language games. The social bond is linguistic..."(1984:40). This connects with Wexler's point above (p.18) and serves as a further illustration of the tendency on the part of certain contemporary theorists to overestimate both the significance of the linguistic dimension of human social and political interaction, and in particular the social, economic and political autonomy of language. In contrast to the apoliticism which characterises Lyotard's commitment to a semiotic and asocial conception of language, Jameson argues that: "The persistence of issues of power and control, particularly in the increasing monopolization of information by private business, would seem to...reinforce the privileged status of Marxism as a mode of analysis"(Intro to Lyotard, 1984:xiii).

As in the case of Rorty, it is necessary to question Lyotard's particularly narrow conception of 'pragmatics'. For, his frequent references to 'agonistics' notwithstanding, it is one which again radically downplays the socially situated nature of language as expressed in the form of the various power relations with which it is integrated. It is precisely with these features of language as an inherently social as opposed to a purely semiotic phenomenon that pragmatics as a critically corrective tendency has been associated – a concern which in turn has helped to distinguish its perspective from the predominantly, and perhaps unavoidably, abstract and seemingly asocial agenda of formal linguistics.

Lyotard himself occasionally exhibits an awareness of the dangers associated with what has been termed here the purely 'semiotic' conception of language. Thus,

according to Lyotard: "...the trivial cybernetic version of information theory misses something of decisive importance, to which I have already called attention: the agonistic aspect of society"(1984:16). In Lyotard's opinion: "What is needed if we are to understand social relations...is not only a theory of communication, but a theory of games which accepts agonistics as a founding principle"(1984:16).

Nevertheless, as already argued above, Lyotard's conception of agonistics together with the notion of language on which it rests is an asocial one divorced from any adequate recognition of the various constraints represented by the concrete social practices of the form of life within which language is embedded. Lyotard at one point refers to "This 'atomization' of the social into flexible networks of language games" and admits this "may seem far removed from the modern reality"(1984:17). Lyotard also recognises that "The objection will be made, at least, that the weight of certain institutions imposes limits on the games, and thus restricts the inventiveness of the players in making their moves"(1984:17). Nevertheless, he confidently asserts, "this is something that can be taken into account without causing any particular difficulty"(1984:17). It is a key contention of the present study that Lyotard's confidence regarding this and other points is misplaced. It therefore appears that, for Lyotard, "language games...are what this is all about"(1984:15).

## Chapter 5

### Words as Weapons: Repoliticizing Discourse

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In a further criticism of the poststructuralist/postmodern conception of language and its political implications, and to set the scene for the development of one of the key themes of the III and IV sections of the thesis, I introduce and defend here an enriched understanding of the notion of 'context'. This is a conception of context based on a development of the Wittgensteinian perspective on the socially-embedded nature of language and understood, broadly, as the interplay of the socio-political and the linguistic. Most importantly, it stresses the need to avoid the autonomization or reification of language in isolation from concrete social practices. As already argued, the Saussurean paradigm in its poststructuralist and postmodernist manifestations is unacceptably abstract and asocial. However, there have been other developments within the philosophy of language and related fields which have brought out more clearly the socially-embedded nature of language, and which can be found expressed in the writings of Wittgenstein (1968) (1969), Austin (1976), Skinner (1976) (1988), and Bourdieu (1992). Of central importance, for example, in the writings of Bourdieu are the concepts of 'symbolic violence' and the 'linguistic market'. The latter notion stresses the way in which linguistic interaction is interwoven with the relations of power in a given society. In particular, it concretely contextualizes linguistic usage by insisting that it be viewed within the network of social practices which determine its production and reception.

A word or two should perhaps be said at this point regarding the relationship assumed in the study between the relevance of the writings of contemporary theorists such as Bourdieu and those of Wittgenstein. Why, in other words, the appeal to Wittgenstein and not simply Bourdieu? The central reason, I shall argue, is that there can be no straightforward appeal to the writings of theorists such as Bourdieu which is not either implicitly or explicitly premised on the social conception of language



underlying the perspective of Wittgenstein. In this study, in other words, the writings of theorists such as Austin, Skinner, and Bourdieu and certain others are regarded as valuable extrapolations and developments of the key Wittgensteinian orientation on language as an irreducibly social phenomenon. Another important consideration underlining the contemporary significance of Wittgenstein stems from the fact already mentioned above concerning the immanent critique which Wittgenstein's writings represent vis-à-vis those of poststructuralism and postmodernism and their shared intellectual lineage. As we have already seen, this is an important point given the fact that influential representatives of such movements such as Rorty and Lyotard claim precisely to be developing the implications of Wittgenstein's writings for social and political theory.

### *5.1 Recontextualizing the Notion of 'Context'*

Ironically, a good deal of the theoretical resources for the required recontextualisation of language already exist within certain strands of postmodern thought. They can be found, for example, in the Derridean concept of the 'trace' i.e., the notion (again essentially Saussurean) that every sign, term or phrase derives its meaning relationally within a system, by being distinguished from all others, i.e., in terms of what it is *not*. It is, as we have seen, precisely through an exploitation and radicalisation of this conception of the semiotic dimensions of language that Derrida is able to argue for the infinite regress of signification. The latter is then something which, according to Derrida, is only halted by the arbitrary imposition of a referent i.e., through an appeal to the 'metaphysics of presence'.

In the same way, however, we can also intelligibly speak, from a Derridean standpoint, of the inescapable 'trace' of an extra-discursive reality. Expressing the point in the structuralist and poststructuralist idiom, what this means is that the poststructuralist and postmodern critique of language itself only achieves its radical, anti-realist edge through the construction of its own form of binary opposition. In other words, the polemical agenda of poststructuralism and postmodernism demands the implicit but nevertheless consistent privileging of the notion ('picture') of language as an autonomous collection of free-floating signifiers and the consequent



downgrading of the notion of an objective and language-independent reality. Thus, far from ruthlessly undermining all such forms of privileging as is often claimed, poststructuralism and postmodernism inconsistently exhibit their own preferred form of binary opposition, one which effectively excludes all reference to an extra-discursive reality. As Edward Said points out: "The supreme irony of what Derrida has called logocentrism is that its critique, deconstruction, is as insistent, as monotonous and as inadvertently systematizing as logocentrism itself"(quoted in Sarup, 1993:54).

In order to counter this tendency I argue, in this chapter, for a more concrete socio-political conception of the 'trace'. What is required, it is argued, is a more adequate appreciation of the various ways in which, to use the Saussurean terms, the synchronic and the diachronic are inextricably interrelated. One of the chief aims will be to re-establish at the theoretical level a proper concern with the diachronic, i.e., with the socio-political and the historical, as opposed to the merely synchronic and semiotic dimensions of language.

As already noted, the notion of the linguistic 'system' lies at the heart of the poststructuralist and postmodernist conception of language and represents a crucial element of the Saussurean intellectual legacy - a conception of language made possible by, and transmitted through, a central structural feature of language itself - the power of generative metaphor. It is also, as argued above, a view of language which is untenable both philosophically and historically. As the previously cited selection of articles concerning the role of language during the period of the French Revolution indicate (see above, p.44), the links existing between the spheres of the political and the linguistic, the synchronic and the diachronic, are indissoluble and thus crucial for a proper understanding of the political significance of language. Other theorists whose writings support this socially-enriched notion of context include Aristotle (1991) whose writings on rhetoric stress the importance of a socially contextualised understanding of the political relevance of language. Similarly, Bourdieu (1992) builds on this conception of language through a detailed sociological investigation into the constitutive and formative dimensions of human

language. In this way, the essential Aristotelian insights into the irreducibly social and political nature of language are preserved and developed.

## 5.2 *Situating Speech: From Aristotle to Wittgenstein*

By way of a corrective to the predominantly semiotic conception of context found in many poststructuralist and postmodern writings, this part of the chapter looks briefly at an alternative set of writings and their recognition of the socially situated, and fully contextualised nature of language.

In the case of Austin (1976), for example, of prime importance is the notion of words as a form of action i.e., what Austin terms the ‘performative’ dimension of language. From our point of view, Austin’s account is both politically significant and valuably corrective vis-à-vis the postmodern conception because, like Wittgenstein’s, it highlights the socially-situated nature of linguistic interaction. Austin’s analysis achieves this through the deployment of the notion of ‘felicity conditions’(1976:57ff). Austin’s analysis thus illustrates the importance of recognising the existence of a set of socially and politically determined criteria determining the appropriateness and meaningfulness of particular forms of speech. In this way, Austin’s perspective underlines the irreducibly social nature of language by pointing out that certain things can only be said by particular people in particular circumstances. In this way, as Potter and Wetherell correctly note: “Austin offers a highly social view of language. He draws our attention to the role played by the web of social conventions in the achievement of actions through talk and thus sensitises the researcher to features of the social context surrounding language use”(1987:18).

Austin’s writings therefore help to redress the conceptual imbalance generated by the Saussurean paradigm of language as an autonomous and apolitical ‘system’. As Potter and Wetherell argue: “Austin’s theory represented a radical departure from much of the previous philosophical work on language because instead of viewing it as an essentially abstract corpus, which can be dealt with in the same way as logic and mathematics, he recognised that language is a human practice”(1987:18). Having said this, Austin’s valuable insight into the nature of language remains in certain important respects an insufficiently concrete and under-politicised one. While he

provides a useful focus, as we have seen, on the socially situated nature of human linguistic interaction this is a theme which is never fully developed in terms of its sociological and political implications.

Turning briefly to the later writings of Wittgenstein, a more in-depth examination and application of which forms the III and IV parts of the study, if there is one element which I would emphasise by way of a critique of the poststructuralist and postmodernist perspective it would be Wittgenstein's discussion of the social and rule-governed nature of language. Like Austin, Wittgenstein's writings emphasise the fact that language is above all an irreducibly social phenomena. Indeed, as we have already seen in the discussion of Rorty, Wittgenstein provides a powerful philosophical critique of the very notion of a 'private language' (PI §§243-275). Wittgenstein, like Austin, provides us with the conceptual basis on which to build a more enriched and politically aware understanding of the notion of context as it applies to language.

The consistently social orientation of Wittgenstein's conception of language brings his approach into line with that of Marxism. Vološinov, for example, highlights the frequent misunderstanding of ideology, the elements of which come to be construed purely as phenomena of individual consciousness, or understood psychologically (1973:xiii-xiv). Wittgenstein and Vološinov are in fact engaged in a similar sort of criticism of traditional conceptions of 'the inner' i.e., of signs, language and ideology as products purely of the individual consciousness. As Vološinov puts it: "The fundamental idea of our entire work – [concerns] the productive role and social nature of the utterance..." (1973:xv). Vološinov's perspective is therefore an important one in coming to terms critically with contemporary formulations of the political significance of the linguistic turn. It is, properly speaking, the first linguistically-based theory of ideology; i.e., it advances the claim that linguistic signs, words and expressions are the material of ideology and that all language use is ideological. Linguistic signs are viewed as an "arena of class struggle" over the meaning of words (1997:262).

The significance of viewing language in its proper social and historical context is also illustrated in Quentin Skinner's thesis concerning the interpretation of political

texts. For Skinner, in order to understand the latter it is essential to “focus not just on the text to be interpreted but on the prevailing conventions governing the treatment of the issues or themes with which the text is concerned”(1976:77). Skinner's thesis illustrates what we might term, following Aristotle, the constraints of the ‘rhetorical situation’ considered in the enlarged sense of a historically, socially, and politically located vocabulary. In contrast to the autonomous conception of language typical of much poststructuralist and postmodernist writing, Skinner's account captures the interactive and historical process involving language and human social and political action. As he points out: “It is true that our social practices help to bestow meaning on our social vocabulary. But it is equally true that our social vocabulary helps to constitute the character of those practices”(1988:132).

From the point of view of our discussion of context, Habermas's writings are also clearly relevant. Firstly, they draw attention to what Habermas argues is the priority of communicative over strategic language use, a factor with clear and important socio-political implications. According to Habermas: “The use of language with an orientation to reaching understanding is the original mode of language use, upon which...the instrumental use of language in general, [is] parasitic”(1984:288). Secondly, Habermas's conception of language is relevant to, and corrective of, the ahistorical and apolitical view of linguistic ‘context’ found in poststructuralist and postmodernist writing. In particular, Habermas focuses on what he refers to as the colonisation of the lifeworld by systems - e.g. the economic market and various forms of state bureaucracy - and on the systematically distorted forms of human communication which result from it. By contrast, argues Habermas: “A communicatively achieved agreement has a rational basis; it cannot be imposed by either party, whether instrumentally through intervention in the situation directly or strategically through influencing decisions of opponents”(1984:287).

Similarly, Shapiro (1981) highlights the importance of achieving a more enriched and sociologically adequate notion of linguistic context by focusing on the significance of pragmatic as well as semantic relations. As he argues: “In addition to the cognitive meaning (based on semantic rules) that the terms or concepts in a public language convey, individual speakers can make special use of signs (e.g., to arouse

emotions, establish new meaning, mobilize collective action). So pragmatic relations involve the way that persons use signs to achieve their individual purposes, as compared with the purposes that are approached ipso facto by all users of the language because they are implied in semantic rules”(1981:29). Shapiro’s analysis strengthens the critique offered above of the socially anaemic and essentially semiotic ‘pragmatism’ underlying the perspectives of Rorty and Lyotard.

As section IV of the study shows via an analysis and critique of certain accounts of Thatcherism, the significance of the notion of context for a correct understanding of the role of language is not confined to the level of the philosophical. On the contrary, a proper grasp of the notion is essential in any attempt to understand the role played by language in the unfolding of various contemporary concrete political conflicts and processes. As Inglehart and Woodward (1967) point out, political conflict and the frequently voiced demands for separatism are not, as is often thought, merely an inevitable result of the existence of linguistic pluralism within nations. Rather, the potential centrifugal force exerted by linguistic pluralism is conditioned by and dependent on two related situational or contextual factors. These are: (1) the level of economic and political development which has been attained by the country in question; and (2) the degree to which social mobility is blocked or hampered through the membership of a given language group (1967:359). Language conceived as a socially and politically-contextualised phenomenon is, in other words, a methodological imperative for an understanding of its political significance.

As already stated, our intention in focusing on the theorists mentioned here is to illustrate the abstract and politically impoverished conception of linguistic context which we currently find exhibited in the majority of poststructuralist and postmodernist writings. However, we also have to note, in turn, the limitations of the potentially corrective approaches just outlined. In general, though the criticism is perhaps less applicable in the case of Skinner and Habermas, Thompson is nevertheless correct when he argues that while the contributions of such ‘ordinary-language’ philosophers as Wittgenstein and Austin have undoubtedly been insightful and important: “their emphasis on the social character of language and the active character of language use has tended to remain abstract. Few attempts have been

made to examine just what is involved in regarding language as a social phenomenon, that is, as a phenomenon enmeshed in relations of social power, in situations of conflict, in processes of social change”(1984:7).

Chilton makes the same point concerning the limitations of such approaches. As he argues: “one of the defects of certain types of discourse and pragmatic analysis [is] that they tend to neglect the fact that speakers do not have equal rights to issue ‘felicitous’ (i.e., functional and acceptable) requests, objections, warnings, offers and so forth. This is, of course, a consequence of our particular social arrangements, not of language viewed as an abstract system; but in so far as pragmatics and discourse are concerned with the interaction between language and social processes, they need, in my view, to take into account the unequal distribution of power in institutionalised communication settings”(1988:99).

However, in the case of the writings of Wittgenstein such ‘limitations’, I will argue in sections III and IV of the study, are largely contingent. They represent in many important respects a failure to develop the valuable implications of Wittgenstein's perspective on language for our understanding of the sphere of the socio-political.

### 5.3 *Slowing the Descent into Discourse:* *Bourdieu's Concept of Language*

Having already considered some of the main philosophically-based objections to the Saussurean paradigm, in this section we examine in more detail some key political implications. This is done through an examination of Bourdieu's writings (1967) (1992), and those of his commentators such as Thompson (1984) and Jenkins (1992).

The significance of Bourdieu's perspective for our study lies above all in the critique which it offers of the notion of an autonomous and homogenous object of linguistic analysis, whether such a conception of language is found e.g., in the Saussurean conception of *langue*, or equally in the Chomskyan theoretical focus on linguistic ‘competence’. One of Bourdieu's main commentators, J.B.Thompson, expresses what can be seen as perhaps the central objection to the approach outlined, namely, that “...it conjures away the social-historical conditions under which a particular language or competence is constituted as legitimate, is acquired by some



speakers, imposed on others, and reproduced as the dominant form of language use” (1984:7).

Of central importance in the writings of Bourdieu are the concepts of ‘symbolic violence’ and the ‘linguistic market’. The latter notion in particular stresses the various ways in which human linguistic interaction is inextricably interwoven with the relations of power in a given society. In particular, it concretely contextualizes linguistic usage by insisting that it be viewed within the structural network of the society which determines its production and reception. As Bourdieu argues: “linguistic relations are always relations of power (*rappports de force*) and, consequently, cannot be elucidated within the compass of linguistic analysis alone. Even the simplest linguistic exchange brings into play a complex and ramifying web of historical power relations between the speaker, endowed with a specific social authority, and an audience, which recognizes this authority to varying degrees, as well as between the groups to which they respectively belong”(quoted in Jenkins, 1992:154).

Through the notion of ‘symbolic violence’ Bourdieu succeeds in highlighting the processes through which order and social restraint are produced by means of indirect, cultural mechanisms as opposed to the more overtly direct, coercive forms of social control. In so doing, Bourdieu’s analysis draws from and elaborates on the Weberian discussion of authority and legitimate domination (Jenkins,1992:104). Important parallels also exist between Bourdieu’s conception of the role of language in human society and that expressed by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972). In both cases, a central theme concerns the ‘internalisation’ by various oppressed groups within society of the dominant language. As a result, such groups and the individuals which make them up are, for Freire, necessarily ‘divided’ ‘contradictory’ and ‘inauthentic’ beings. Consequently, an important part of the process of liberation, according to Freire, consists in “speaking one’s own word” and in “naming the world”(1972:32-33;121).

Similarly, for Bourdieu, the concept of symbolic violence denotes what, from a political perspective, is the arbitrary imposition of systems of symbolism and meaning (what Bourdieu refers to as the ‘cultural arbitrary’) by dominant groups or



classes on the rest of society. Crucial to the process is the misrecognition which occurs on the part of the subordinate groups or classes concerned. As Bourdieu puts it, misrecognition is “the process whereby power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are but in a form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder”(1977:xiii). Thus as Jenkins points out, what we are offered in the writings of Bourdieu is a general theory of socialisation (1992:109). From the point of view of the present study it is the relation which Bourdieu perceives between the political dimensions of this socialisation and the linguistic processes through which it is achieved which is of prime importance.

This is brought out in Bourdieu's contention that speakers both recognise the legitimacy of the official language, and that this recognition is then reflected in the fact that speakers will, unconsciously, adjust their linguistic output to harmonise with the prevailing state of the ‘linguistic market’. A further and inevitable consequence of such ‘adjustment’ concerns the fact, noted by Thompson (1984:46), that those speakers who do not possess the competence to utter the official language, but who nevertheless recognise its legitimacy, are condemned to silence on ‘formal’ occasions. This is an example of the symbolic violence which, for Bourdieu, is an inherent feature of linguistic interaction within class-divided societies. There are parallels here between Bourdieu's analysis and our earlier reference to Bernstein's concept of restricted codes (see above, pp. 29-30). Indeed, Bourdieu himself acknowledges the work of Bernstein (1977:133). Thus, for Bourdieu as for Bernstein (1971) (1973), and Edelman (1971) (1977), one of the most insidious aspects of symbolic violence is the unconscious complicity of the victims in their own oppression.

In order to understand more fully the process involved here, we have to note the particular nature of the linguistic model underlying Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence. For the logical form of the latter merely represents, in essence, a more concrete appropriation and politicisation of the conception of language which forms the basis of Saussure's relational concept of meaning. As noted earlier, for Saussure, meaning results from the particular ‘value’ which a sign has in relation to others in the system (*langue*). In the same way, for Bourdieu, the linguistic utterance of a

particular individual within a society has a value determined by the latter's position within the 'linguistic market' which, Bourdieu insists, is always dominated by particular socially privileged forms of speech. Bourdieu's analysis departs from the abstract, ahistorical Saussurean notion of a linguistic 'system' by insisting on viewing the latter concept in concrete social terms i.e., as a system which is, and which reflects in its content and hierarchical structure, the outcome of particular political and historical struggles. What Bourdieu highlights, as did Bernstein before him, is the existence of a linguistic hierarchy within society which systematically privileges, both in terms of form and content, particular kinds of linguistic utterance over others.

Again, and with specific reference to Chomsky's discussion of the notion of 'competence', Bourdieu's writings highlight once more what can fairly be regarded as the, no doubt unintentional, but nevertheless implicitly abstract and apolitical nature of such a focus. For, as Bourdieu points out: "Language is not only an instrument of communication or even of knowledge, but also an instrument of power. One seeks not only to be understood but also to be believed, obeyed, respected, distinguished. Whence the complete definition of competence as right to speak, that is, as right to the legitimate language, the authorized language, the language of authority. Competence implies the power to impose reception" (emphasis in original, quoted in Thompson, 1984:46):

Thompson also illustrates in more detail what many critics regard as the unacceptably abstract nature of the Chomskyan conception of competence. As he argues: "what we possess is not the capacity to produce an unlimited sequence of grammatically well-formulated sentences, but rather the capacity to produce sentences *a propos*, that is, expressions which are relevant to specific situations and tacitly adjusted to the relations of power which characterize those situations. Our competence lies not in our capacity to produce an utterance like 'I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth' anytime and anywhere, but rather in our capacity to produce such a sentence when it is appropriate to do so and when we are endowed with the requisite authority to carry out the act"(1984:7).

The writings of Bourdieu and Thompson emphasise the irreducibly political dimensions of language use; the fact that linguistic communication and interaction necessarily take place within the real world context of social structures which are invariably constituted by an unequal distribution of power. In this respect, Bourdieu's analysis echoes that of Habermas (1987), in particular the recognition by the latter of the existence of 'systematically distorted' forms of communication arising from a penetration of the 'life-world' by economic and strategic interests. However, there are not only some important parallels between the approaches of both theorists. For Bourdieu's sociological approach might also be viewed as a valuable corrective capable of countering some of the limitations to be found within the, at times all too abstract, Habermasian conception of language. This critical potential stems from the more politically focused perspective which Bourdieu's approach encourages on the network of constraints which condition and determine linguistic interaction within a class society.

However, such remarks, while fundamentally correct, require to be tempered by a recognition that Habermas, like Chomsky and Saussure, is engaged in a philosophical inquiry into the nature of language itself and, in the case of Habermas, into the requirements of an 'ideal-speech situation'. As a result, such discussions must necessarily be expected to operate at a fairly high level of abstraction.<sup>11</sup> Also, in the case of Chomsky, it should be noted that even in his more technical writings one finds a recognition of the numerous factors affecting and influencing actual linguistic performance (cf. McCarthy, 1978:274n4).

The analysis of language carried out by Bourdieu represents a way of more concretely capturing what is involved in the notion of language-games or forms of life. In this way, Bourdieu's perspective, I would argue, offers a useful basis for a critique of the Rortyan notion of 'edification' (as opposed to systematic philosophising) as the only role for language and philosophy in the 'postmodern' era (see Rorty, 1980:357-372). Similarly, Rorty's essentially Oakeshottian conception of a disinterested 'conversation of mankind' is brought into serious question by Bourdieu's sustained focus on the links which exist between language and power. Bourdieu's emphasis on the context of linguistic action conceived as a social network

of differential power relations thus effectively sociologizes and politicises the abstract Saussurean relational conception of meaning. In the process it also exposes the radical and ultimately naive shortcomings of Rorty's notion of the 'edifying conversation of mankind'.

Bourdieu's analysis can also be viewed as a more thorough working-out, in sociological and political terms, of the critical potential implicit in the Aristotelian conception of rhetoric. There are at least two areas in which this can be seen. The first concerns Bourdieu's argument that linguistic competence requires to be properly and more concretely conceived as a socially conferred 'right to speak' and, furthermore, that competence thus understood 'implies the power to impose reception'. Bourdieu's treatment of the notion of competence represents a consistent development of the points made in the Aristotelian analysis of *ethos* (see Aristotle, 1991:74ff).

Secondly, Bourdieu's insistence on the importance of a concrete social and political contextualisation of discourse is consistent with the Aristotelian focus on the constraints of the rhetorical situation to which the rhetor must adapt his or her linguistic utterances. While the degree of determination to be attributed to the latter has been a matter of controversy among scholars of Aristotelian rhetoric, Bourdieu's analysis of the social context of linguistic interaction nevertheless represents a consistent and fruitful extension of Aristotle's position.<sup>12</sup> Thus while Aristotle's writings on rhetoric have often been regarded either purely as a treatise on the stylistic or figurative dimensions of language or as a manual of practical advice to potential statesmen, Bourdieu's analysis illustrates, albeit implicitly, their further potential for a linguistically based form of institutional critique.

While in broad agreement with the arguments expressed above by Bourdieu and Thompson, some qualifications should be noted. Firstly, it is true that if we focus solely on the linguistic writings of theorists such as Chomsky we come away with the impression of a body of work which, in its density and abstraction, has little to say concerning the socio-political dimensions of language use. However this, I would argue, is to set too much store by Chomsky's insistence on the division between his theoretical and political writings. The argument for such a separation more accurately

reflects Chomsky's concern that the investigation and critique of political structures might be viewed by ordinary citizens strictly as the preserve of intellectuals. Consequently, he is at pains to avoid any equation being drawn between intellectual ability in the field of linguistics, or elsewhere, and the qualifications required for the task of political analysis, or undertaking what Chomsky terms 'intellectual self-defence' against government and media propaganda. The requirements for the latter, he insists, are essentially basic and thus universally distributed among the population (see Chomsky, 1979:3-5).

It is not the case, therefore, that Chomsky sees no political implications stemming from his linguistic research. On the contrary, he is well aware of the political conclusions which might be drawn by ordinary people who regard intellectual distinction in this field as a prerequisite for political engagement. I would therefore argue, Chomsky's own disclaimers notwithstanding, that it is both more accurate and consistent with Chomsky's project as a whole, to regard his writings, both technical and political, as constituting a complementary whole. Recognition of such a connection provides, in turn, further reason for reassessing the criticisms made by commentators such as Bourdieu and Thompson concerning the 'abstractness' of the Chomskyan analysis. For, in contrast to the Saussurean paradigm, Chomsky's highly technical and hence necessarily abstract focus on the concept of linguistic competence is in fact complemented and systematically completed through the attention given in his more overtly political writings on, for example, the power of the media, and the abuse of power in society in general. Thus in books such as *Language and Responsibility* (1979) *Manufacturing Consent*, (1988) and *American Power and the New Mandarins* (1969) and in countless articles, Chomsky is actually providing the dimension which critics who focus attention solely on his theoretical work argue is missing; namely, a focus and emphasis on those socio-political contexts whose configurations of power and interest serve to constrain or exclude particular patterns and styles of language use while legitimating others. While it is not, as Chomsky rightly insists, a logical one, there nevertheless exists a clear and important connection between the linguistic and the political writings, a recognition

of which weakens many of the criticisms of 'abstractness' which have been directed towards the former.

Secondly, a number of criticisms have been voiced concerning the writings of Bourdieu, at least one of which is relevant to the concerns and interests of the present study. The criticism focuses on the question of the balance Bourdieu achieves, or fails to achieve, in his writings between style and cognitive content. Thompson, for example, argues: "that Bourdieu's preoccupation with style, with the way things are said and with the profits obtained thereby, leads him to neglect the content of what is said. He thus fails to give sufficient attention to the question of meaning (or signification) and he strips away all too abruptly the rational features of linguistic communication"(1984:43).

If this is correct, it underlines the relevance of the Aristotelian conception of the language/politics relationship. For if we consider the essence of Thompson's criticism we find it echoes Aristotle's insistence in *The Art of Rhetoric* on the inseparability of the proofs of *ethos*, *logos* and *pathos* in linguistic interaction (See 1991:1356a). This in turn finds expression in Aristotle's holistic conception of the enthymeme. The insistence on the inseparability of the proofs (*pisteis*) of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* reflects the imperative to view one's interlocutor as a *person*, i.e., as a complex being all of whose faculties require to be engaged by the good rhetor, rather than merely as an adversary or object to be overwhelmed by the selective use of proofs directed e.g., at the faculty of reason alone (see Grimaldi, 1972:17).

As Aristotle's writings indicate, there exist a number of constraining factors both within the rhetorical relationship itself, and within any particular situation with which the rhetorician might be faced. Recognition of such factors goes some way towards answering the critics of rhetoric who characterize it as invariably the tool of deceitful despots. A key part of the present-day relevance of Aristotle's writings on language is, however, the identification of a number of what might be termed (following the Wittgensteinian discussion of rule-following and language learning) 'public-check' constraints on the use of language. The irreducibly social conception of language underlying the perspectives of both Wittgenstein and Aristotle undercuts the

postmodern celebration of the ludic dimension of language and its allegedly emancipatory and progressive potential.

The importance of Bourdieu's analysis for the present study can be summarised in the following way. His writings highlight the inadequacy of any purely methodological or 'linguistic' approach to language, i.e., one which attempts to analyse or understand the latter in effective isolation from the cultural context and social conditions of its production and reception. In this way Bourdieu illustrates and enriches the importance of the notion of 'context'.



### Section III

#### **A Picture Which Holds Us Captive: The Alleged Conservatism of a Wittgensteinian Perspective**

### Wittgenstein, Criticism and Conservatism

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The issue of the alleged conservatism of ‘description’ and of a focus on the ‘use’ of language is considered in more detail in chapter 9. In the present chapter we look at the issue of ‘conservatism’ itself in more detail. In particular, I argue that a proper understanding of the logic of conservatism shows that it is not incompatible with social criticism. Thus we can agree that a Wittgensteinian perspective is conservative in the properly understood sense of the term without agreeing with the conclusions drawn by critics such as Marcuse (1964) or Gellner (1979).

#### 6.1 *The Logic of Conservatism*

According to the interpretation advanced by critics, certain conservative socio-political consequences follow from any application of a Wittgensteinian approach to social science. Frequent reference is made, for example, to the critical immunity allegedly afforded by a Wittgensteinian approach to the existing social and political practices of a particular language-game or form of life - a point raised by Marcuse (1964:170-199), Gellner (1979:246-247), and Trigg (1991:218ff). In the eyes of such critics, any anti-representational and anti-foundationalist conception of language such as Wittgenstein’s, which locates the meaning and understanding of concepts and practices ‘internally’ entails the lack of a critical standpoint. This results, it is argued, in a politically quietistic endorsement of the status quo. These implications are linked with what is taken to be the Wittgensteinian focus on the mere ‘description’ - as opposed to the explanation or criticism - of language.

In the exposition of this critique one of the passages most frequently cited to buttress the charge of conservatism is the following, in which Wittgenstein writes: “What has to be accepted, the given, is - so one could say - forms of life” (PI p.226e).

This is usually combined with Wittgenstein's statement that: "Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it...It leaves everything as it is"(PI §124). The critique of Wittgenstein advanced by Herbert Marcuse thus focuses on what he regards as yet another form of 'positivism', namely, the linguistic philosophy of writers such as Wittgenstein, Ryle and Austin (1964:173ff). Marcuse's argument is that such philosophy has irretrievably conservative consequences, since it concentrates sole attention on, and therefore succeeds in reifying, the extant language and concepts of capitalist technological society.

We can begin by noting the argument advanced by Nyiri (1982), another key exponent of the conservative interpretation of Wittgenstein. Paradoxically, Nyiri's line of thought actually helps to undermine the standard conservative interpretation in a number of ways. In his discussion of the issue of conservatism, Nyiri comments on what he terms the "neo-conservative paradox" - a paradox to which he believes a Wittgensteinian approach provides the solution. According to Nyiri, the paradox consists, on the one hand, in the conservative belief in absolute standards coupled, on the other hand, with the recognition that "all absolute standards have perished historically, are a thing of the past, and fixed truths do not exist at all" (1982:56). Wittgenstein's approach is held to offer a solution to this so-called paradox since in one sense it offers an account of our language and practices which is 'groundless', insofar as it eschews any typically 'rationalist' reliance on universal or transcendent forms of justification. Yet, on the other hand, a Wittgensteinian perspective - in particular that formulated via the notion of a 'form of life' - is also one which is nevertheless still 'grounded', but in the shared judgements and practices of language users (see Wittgenstein, PI §242). Thus, what is important from a conservative point of view is that the latter is a non-transcendental type of grounding but one which nevertheless entails the desired continuity and tradition (see Nyiri, 1982:59).

However, we might justifiably inquire, firstly, whether the issue of change is quite so much of a paradox or dilemma for the conservative as Nyiri contends. The point becomes clearer when we recall that one of the central elements of conservatism consists chiefly in an opposition to what are deemed to be projects of 'rationalist

constructivism' in human social and political affairs. In other words, conservatism is not necessarily opposed to change *per se*. As Edmund Burke concedes: "A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation"(E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, p.106, cited in Kleinberg, 1991:105). It is then to a large extent the nature and scope of the change concerned which is at issue.

Secondly, given the alleged hostility of conservatives to the rationalist project, and in particular to the notion of knowledge as grounded in reason, it is questionable whether from a viewpoint which wishes to stress the importance of intuition and emotion, one can rightly speak, as Nyiri does, of Wittgenstein's later writings as providing "a *logical foundation*" for "a conservative-traditionalist view of history"(1976:503, emphasis added).

On a more general level, the point raised by Lock calls into question the whole basis for the conservative aversion to 'rationalist' forms of socio-political criticism (1989:272-273). According to Lock, there are various 'internal contradictions' which, it can be assumed, will form an inherent feature of any given society. As Lock argues: "If some people may be said in a given society to feel or consider congenial to themselves not the dominant culture or ideology...but rather certain ideas and practices, norms and expectations characteristic of an earlier epoch, which have somehow escaped destruction (at least temporarily) and live on in the interstices of the new society, then it will have to be admitted that such a new society contains internal contradictions" (1989:272).

Given the existence of such contradictions, Lock argues that conservatives themselves, despite their understandable reluctance to admit the point, are nevertheless inevitably forced to take an oppositional, and hence critical stand, from within a given society. This follows from the fact that as a conservative one is necessarily forced to criticise those proposals and developments which one regards as 'rationalist' or 'constructivist', and hence as out of keeping with what is perceived to be the 'natural' course of socio-political 'evolution'. In other words, the very intelligibility and coherence of a conservative perspective requires a recognition of the practice of social criticism as an inherent feature of forms of life.<sup>13</sup>

In an attempt to distance itself from what it regards as the distinctly rationalist activity of criticism, conservatism of course makes frequent appeals to such notions as 'emotion', and 'instinct' etc. However, as Kleinberg points out: "an emphasis on instinct and emotion is not incompatible with an appeal to rational argument" (1991:109). Furthermore, as Kleinberg reminds us: "emotions are also typically belief-dependent in that we frequently seek to justify them by pointing to certain facts"(1991:109). In addition, since such 'facts' are themselves only identifiable as such from within, and according to, some theoretical framework, the conservative attempt to distance itself from rationalism is further undermined.<sup>14</sup>

As will become clear in the following chapters of the study, we can therefore agree that a Wittgensteinian perspective is conservative in the sense outlined since this itself is a position which is compatible with, indeed itself engages in, forms of social criticism.

## Chapter 7

### Wittgenstein's Conception of Language

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#### 7.1 *Language-Games and Form of Life*

The issue of the relationship in Wittgenstein's writings between the concepts of 'language-game' and 'form of life' is of prime significance. In particular, how this relationship is conceived is an important factor in determining evaluations of the alleged conservatism or otherwise of a Wittgensteinian approach. It is also directly related to the issue of linguistic idealism raised in section I of the study in relation to the writings of Lyotard and Rorty.

This chapter argues for a reappraisal of this relationship. This is a key component in the anti-reductionist critique of certain formulations of the linguistic turn as applied to the sphere of social science. The concepts of language-game and form of life are not equatable as is frequently implied in the poststructuralist and postmodernist readings of Wittgenstein. In addition, a fuller understanding of the political significance of Wittgenstein's perspective is established on the basis of a reading of the concept of a form of life which is not left, as is frequently the case, at the abstract level of anthropology or biology.

As we shall see, a number of key passages in Wittgenstein's writings underline the fact that the concept of a form of life is not reducible to that of a language-game. According to Max Black, however: "The notion of 'Lebensform' is not really very important for Wittgenstein"(quoted in Haller, 1988:130). This may well be true, but only because Wittgenstein, unlike the majority of poststructuralist and postmodernist writers, considers 'language-game' and 'form of life' to be interchangeable labels denoting the fundamental nexus of language and concrete social practices. Thus

according to Wittgenstein: "I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the 'language-game'"(PI §7).

A particular set of problems is generated when a Wittgensteinian perspective is construed, as it tends to be in the writings of Lyotard and Rorty, solely on a 'language-game' level and is then applied to the sphere of the socio-political. In this respect there are definite parallels between the 'picture' generated and transmitted by the Saussurean paradigm of a language-system and that suggested by certain readings of the notion of 'language-games'.

By contrast, as McGinn argues: "Wittgenstein's concept of a language-game is clearly to be set over and against the idea of language *as a system of meaningful signs* that can be considered in abstraction from its actual employment. Instead of approaching language as a system of signs with meaning, we are prompted to think about it *in situ*, embedded in the lives of those who speak it"(1997:44, emphasis added). McGinn's point is important given the already noted attempt by Harris to draw parallels between the later writings of Wittgenstein and those of Saussure (see above p.12). In contrast to the purely synchronic and relational context of the Saussurean paradigm, what we find within Wittgenstein's writings is a gradual process of increasing concretization of context with respect to the understanding of language. As Glock notes: "Whereas at first words have meaning within a proposition, and the game they are used in, [Wittgenstein] later said that 'words have meaning only in the stream of life'"(1996:197). (The quotation comes from Wittgenstein's *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume 1*, §913). Such considerations run counter to the frequent tendency among commentators and appropriators of Wittgenstein's writings towards linguistic idealism, a point evidenced above all by their treatment of the notion of a language-game (see 4.1 above).

As suggested above in reference to Black's point, it may well be that Wittgenstein himself considered the terms language-game and form of life to be interchangeable. However, this is only because he also considered them both to encompass a conception of language and practices as inextricably intertwined. As Wittgenstein insists: "[T]o imagine a language means to imagine a form of life"(PI §19). As Glock



argues: “Wittgenstein never identified the notion of a language-game with that of a form of life. Language-games are ‘part of’, embedded in, a form of life”(1996:197). The inclusive and non-reductionist nature of Wittgenstein's conception of language is also evident in his references to “the *whole language-game*”, and “the *human language-game*”(Blue and Brown Books, p.108; *On Certainty*, §554-9, emphasis mine, quoted in Glock, 1996:197). As Glock points out: “It is the way in which linguistic activities are interwoven with, and embedded in, our non-linguistic practices, which makes them less trivial than games” (1996:197). As Finch argues with respect to the notion of a language-game: “...the unit of meaning here already involves in one complex the three factors of *human beings*, a *world-setting* and *language*”(1995:44). Such points are important in countering the postmodern appropriation of Wittgenstein's writings and the reliance on a particular and one-sided reading of the notion of language-games.

Benton's otherwise valuable discussion of the political significance of Wittgenstein's writings is arguably misleading on the question of the relation between the practices of a language-game and those of a form of life. According to Benton: “...language-games are not related by [Wittgenstein] to the more-or-less enduring social practices from which he abstracts them”(1976:6). Benton's analysis, however, underplays the significance of the stress Wittgenstein places throughout his later writings on the interconnected nature of language and practices within forms of life. Wittgenstein, for example, poses the rhetorical question: “Is the meaning only the use of words? Is it not the way this interlocks with life?”(*Philosophical Grammar*, 65, quoted in Finch, 1995:44).

From our point of view what is significant here is the stress placed by Wittgenstein on the notion of language as part of the activities and practices of a form of life. The same underlying point is made by Wittgenstein elsewhere: “Language, I should like to say, relates to a way of living. In order to describe the phenomenon of language one must describe a practice, not something that happens once, *no matter of what kind*”(RFM p.335). Wittgenstein writings again reinforce the links between language and recurring social practices. Also significant is the fact that out of Wittgenstein's five uses of the term ‘form of life’ in *Philosophical Investigations*

none equates the latter concept with that of a language-game (see PI §§ 19, 23, 241; pp.174,226).

Although the main discussion is reserved for chapter 8, the passage just quoted from *Remarks on The Foundations of Mathematics* also has important implications for the issue of what is involved in the description of language use, and how we should construe the concept of ordinary language. In contrast to the conception of language implied by the Saussurean paradigm there is a distinct temporal dimension to Wittgenstein's point that practices are "not something that happens once". This implies that the description of ordinary language use focuses not merely synchronically, but on the historical and institutional dimensions associated with language and the social practices which make it possible.

The non-reductionist nature of Wittgenstein's perspective on language also comes through in the following passage where he points out: "It is characteristic of our language that the foundation on which it grows consists in steady forms of life, regular activity. Its function is determined *above all* by the action which it accompanies"( *Philosophical Occasions*, p.404, quoted in Glock, 1996:125). This, together with the passages quoted above, indicates Wittgenstein's continued stress on viewing language as a phenomenon embedded within human social practices of both a linguistic and extra-linguistic nature. There is, in other words, a recognition - absent in the writings of Lyotard, Rorty and others - that language use and the effects achievable via its deployment are context-dependent and thus subject to various forms of social and political constraint.

The latter point also frequently goes unrecognised by those commentators convinced of the socio-political relevance of Wittgenstein's writings. Thus according to Kitching: "...all the rules are open to interpretation, with some of them allowing great latitude for interpretation"(1994:126). Kitching's account, like others, suffers from the fact that it tends to focus predominantly on the logical aspect of contingency. What goes unrecognised are the important political implications which follow from Wittgenstein's insistence that, although language and meaning are logically contingent, nevertheless a whole number of key concepts and their meanings 'stand fast' due to the role which they play within the network of human

linguistic and concrete practices represented by particular forms of life. There is a failure adequately to recognize, for example, the political implications of Wittgenstein's discussion of hinge propositions. Similarly, Kitching overemphasises "the creative role of language users in *deciding* what is simple and what complex, what is abstract and what concrete"(1994:120). This chimes with Rorty's eulogistic account of the redescriptive potential of the ironist poet.

Although, as Genova points out, Wittgenstein was concerned to "...demonstrate the relativity of ways of seeing...*What inhibits the skepticism which usually accompanies such relativism is the double recognition that while there is no final way the world is, forms of life constrain the world, giving temporary shape and articulation to its infinite potentiality*"(1995:19, emphasis added). This kind of recognition counters the interpretations of Wittgenstein found in the writings of Lyotard and Rorty, and, as we shall see, in those of Laclau and Mouffe. Both the poststructuralist and postmodernist formulations of the linguistic turn share to varying degrees the implicit assumption that language and conceptual structures are radically indeterminate on a socio-empirical as well as a logical level. What occurs is a reification of the notion of the 'contingency' of language. By contrast, Wittgenstein's writings underline the fact that this is a feature of language constrained by the social practices of a form of life.

The attraction of theorists such as Rorty, Lyotard, Laclau and Mouffe to the later writings of Wittgenstein is undoubtedly connected with the idea that Wittgenstein is in some sense a 'post-foundational' philosopher. The problem is that 'post-foundational' is equated with 'no-foundations' and the licensing of linguistic idealism i.e., the notion that language is all there is, and that somehow new uses of language in and of themselves produce new social and political transformations. In this respect it is significant that throughout the passages in which he extols the virtues of an 'ironic' approach Rorty rarely if ever refers to the concept of a form of life. This 'surface grammar' or language-game level of approach chimes with Rorty's rhetorical and political purposes; i.e., to emphasise the possibility of the infinite and unconstrained 'redescription' of our social and political situation.

It also supports a radical relativist reading of Wittgenstein's perspective which brings it close to Lyotard's conception of incommensurable language-games. Significantly, this tends to be the version most frequently located and denounced by critics of a Wittgensteinian approach as unacceptable, since it allegedly rules out the possibility of any shared linguistic or conceptual basis for critique (see Trigg, 1991:216;221-222). Even those committed to the possibility of the exposition and defence of a non-conservative reading of Wittgenstein's significance for social science such as Pitkin, implicitly conflate the notion of a language-game with that of a form of life (see 1993:147).

## *7.2 From Biology to Ideology: Readings of the Notion of a Form of Life*

On a political level, we also need to question critically some of the connotations associated with the idea of a form of life. In particular, this is true with respect to the notion of 'the community'. In Wittgenstein's later writings the latter is often seen as fulfilling the role of a 'public-check' ruling out potentially aberrant forms of linguistic behaviour. However, certain construals of the notion represent examples of a form of conceptual reification with the attendant political implications. What needs to be questioned is the frequently implied notion of a real egalitarian sharing of input concerning the determination of the meaning and content of the various key terms of social and political importance in circulation within society. Wittgenstein's own deliberately vague formulation of the notion stems as ever from a desire to avoid the dogmatism of a final 'picture'. Nevertheless, the concept requires to be more adequately grasped in sociological and political terms if we are to appreciate fully the significance of Wittgenstein's perspective. Similarly, in criticising the ordinary language approach as found in the writings of Gilbert Ryle, di Norcia notes:

...very often an abstract 'we' is used. It is variously identified as excluding our ancestors, or being anyone. But the 'we' in 'when we speak of the ordinary stock use of a word' may be 'us' or the author's royal 'we'...Significant changes in usage, from class to class, or country to country and any contradictions they may involve as with terms like 'fair' 'just', 'democracy' etc., seem irrelevant to Ryle's concern for the abstract universal (1975:26).

It is arguably never 'the community' as such (for obvious sociological and political reasons) which is, or can be, involved in the role of public-check. For it is not 'the community' as such which determines the meaning and content of key politically relevant forms of linguistic and conceptual usage. This is not to deny linguistic change and development. However, as the history of politics and political thought illustrates, language and the meaning of particular terms and concepts have continually been subject to more than merely 'evolutionary' pressures. Rather, 'our' 'shared' language reflects the struggles which have historically taken place over the meaning of what Raymond Williams has termed 'keywords'(1988). Moreover, in a post-polis society the 'shared form of life' implied in the concept of a linguistic 'community' is fundamentally misleading. Rather, we 'share' a language in the same sense in which we 'share' a currency. Words and concepts, as Wittgenstein suggests, can be viewed as 'tools' (PI §§11,360). But this is not to say that such 'means of production' are owned equally in common. For a good deal of what we 'share' consists of the dominant interpretation of those key terms and concepts which help to constitute a particular form of life; in other words, interpretations articulated by interested groups occupying the requisite positions of power.

The concept of a form of life can also be read in a number of other ways, each of which either underplays or ignores its political significance. In Newton Garver's interpretation of the concept of a form of life, for example, the latter is equated with 'natural history' ("The Form of Life in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*", quoted in Haller, 1988:129). However, as McGinn argues: "The concept of life, as Wittgenstein uses it here, is not biological life, nor is it an ahistorical idea of the life of a particular species. The idea of a form of life applies rather to historical groups of individuals who are bound together into a community by a shared set of complex, language-involving practices...mediated by a set of intricate, historically-specific language-games, our human form of life is fundamentally cultural [and hence ultimately political] (rather than biological) in nature"(1997:51).

The issue of the relation between language-game and form of life is correctly grasped in the analysis offered by Conway (1989). In a useful corrective to the

ongoing debate, Conway argues for a recognition of the epistemological and explanatory priority of the concept of a form of life over that of a language-game (1989:42-54, and *passim*). In addition, Conway illustrates the influential nature of the misinterpretations of Wittgenstein which have frequently arisen on the basis of a conflation of these two concepts (*ibid*, *passim*). Conway's remarks are significant for the following reasons. Firstly, they act as a valuable counter-weight to the current profusion of individualist, asocial, and hyper-relativist interpretations of Wittgenstein which have flourished under the general banner of 'postmodernism' - in particular, the appropriation of Wittgenstein's writings by theorists such as Lyotard and Rorty, but also, as section IV will show, to a lesser extent the reading of Wittgenstein found in the writings of Laclau, Mouffe, and Hall. Secondly, Conway's analysis renders problematic the various political implications and prescriptions which have been held by postmodern theorists to flow from a Wittgensteinian perspective conceived as awarding priority to the notion of language-games over form of life.

Also significant here is Wittgenstein's reference to the "common behaviour of mankind": i.e., to "the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language"(PI §206). As with the concept of a 'form of life', the foregoing remark is, of course, clearly capable of being construed in a purely minimalist sense; i.e., with reference solely to our shared human biology, as it apparently is, for example, by Wittgenstein himself (see 1969:§47). Clearly, to interpret the remark in such terms entails a lessening of its cultural, political and anti-relativistic significance. However, the fundamentally social orientation of Wittgenstein's later approach to language suggests we should avoid such reductionism. The concept of the 'social' is not in other words coextensive with or reducible to the biological. Moreover, the interpretation and significance of the notion of a common "system of reference" requires to be viewed in the context of the enormous changes taking place in the globalisation of communication, and the greatly increased rate of cross-cultural exchange and interaction - in other words, within the context of the development of what has been termed by some the emergence of 'one world' (see Gellner, 1982).

In line with the sociological interpretation outlined by Conway (1989), (and shared, according to the latter, by Winch, D.Z. Phillips, and Norman Malcolm

(ibid:47)), it can be argued that the most fruitful application of a Wittgensteinian approach to the social sciences will be premised on an interpretation of the notion of a form of life which views the latter along the lines of a socio-cultural system, rather than solely in terms of some form of universal biological substratum (see Conway,1989:42).



## Chapter 8

### **Critique and the Significance of a Reconceived Saying/Showing Distinction in Wittgenstein's Later Writings**

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A consistent focus on language as an irreducibly social phenomenon is the central theme of Wittgenstein's writings. We cannot properly conceive of language without recognising the network of social practices which render it possible. It is this which renders the concerns and insights of a Wittgensteinian perspective politically relevant. The 'grammar' of the concept 'social' is inextricably intertwined with that of the 'political', for such social practices are themselves ordered within various hierarchies and sets of power relations. If, as Wittgenstein insists, language is social and the social is political then it is not possible to conceive of language as social without also viewing it as a political phenomenon. For reasons relating to personal and psychological dispositions, and to the nature of his conception of philosophy as descriptive and not explanatory, the political nature of language is *shown* by Wittgenstein's writings rather than explicitly stated.

In contrast to the conservative interpretation, this chapter highlights the critical implications generated by a Wittgensteinian orientation towards language as an irreducibly social phenomenon. This particular reading is developed and defended via an alternative interpretation and deployment of the 'saying/showing' distinction first expounded in the early writings of Wittgenstein (see 1974:26ff). It will be argued that critics of a Wittgensteinian approach have focused their attention almost exclusively on what is explicitly stated in the writings of Wittgenstein. On one level this is, of course, a perfectly understandable and justifiable method of procedure. Indeed, to do otherwise, it might plausibly be argued, would in fact be distinctly un-Wittgensteinian; insofar as it seems to entail going beyond, or searching 'below', the actual use of language, in this case the texts of Wittgenstein. Nevertheless, what is inevitably omitted by any strictly literalist approach towards Wittgenstein's writings

and perspective is precisely a due consideration of their possible political implications; i.e., what a Wittgensteinian perspective on language *shows* us with respect to its role in our social practices, institutions and procedures. In other words, the fact that, as far as we know, Wittgenstein never intentionally sat down to write an explicitly political treatise says nothing about the possible political and social import of those writings currently extant. Moreover, as Wittgenstein himself would undoubtedly have pointed out, it is the *use* or *uses* to which the writings of a particular theorist have or can be put which is the important factor in any consideration of their full social and political significance. In view of the impact they have had on theorists such as Lyotard, Rorty, Laclau and Mouffe, this is particularly important in the case of Wittgenstein's own writings. For these have played an important role not only in the development of the linguistic turn itself, but in the subsequent impact of particular interpretations of the latter on our current thought concerning the socio-political sphere.

### 8.1 *Language and Hinge-Propositions*

Wittgenstein's later writings 'show', for example, the role of language in ideology. According to Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*, there will necessarily exist within a language-game or within a form of life a number of crucial 'hinge propositions' which - in the normal course of events - tend to go unquestioned; they are, as Wittgenstein puts it, 'held fast' (1969:§§116,125,144). They can therefore be said to function in an ideological manner since their current status as hinge propositions shields their ultimately contingent nature i.e., as the human product of historically specific social and political practices.

A Wittgensteinian perspective thus highlights the way in which a whole range of particular assumptions may be rendered immune to criticism. This, of course, is to assume - not unreasonably I believe - that some of these hinge propositions will be politically significant, i.e., not merely, as Wittgenstein's own examples tend to be, self-evident and universally held beliefs of a generally uncontentious nature, such as 'the earth has existed for many years past', or 'all men are mortal', etc.(see 1969:§§91,108,138). In other words, it is reasonable to assume - given Wittgenstein's

insistence on the inextricable links between language and social practices - that the conceptual content, interpretation, and understanding of a large proportion of such hinge propositions will tend to reflect currently dominant views on, for example, such things as the nature of society and how it should be organised.

In his later writings Wittgenstein is concerned, among other things, to underline the fact that language does not simply 'picture' or 'hook onto' reality as the *Tractatus* would have us believe. Rather, our language and the social practices which sustain it are crucial elements in determining how we view the world. An illustration of the political significance of the point can be found in Wittgenstein's comment in the 'Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough' (p.35), in which we are invited to consider the possibility that: "a whole mythology is deposited in our language"(cited in Souza Filho, 1984:3). This line of thought is a key theme of Wittgenstein's writings in *On Certainty* (1969). In particular, Wittgenstein's discussion highlights the relationship between language and the broad process of political socialization effected via the transmission of certain, traditionally unquestioned, presuppositions (hinge propositions). According to Wittgenstein: "I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: *it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false*. The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules"(1969:§§94;95, emphasis added).

Wittgenstein's conception of language as an irreducibly social and historical creation thus highlights in a distinctly non-conservative fashion the fact that things could have been different. Different social practices and institutions would result in different hinge propositions 'standing fast'. Contrary to critics such as Marcuse, the implications which flow from the realisation that: "An education quite different from ours might also be the foundation for quite different concepts"(1981:387) cannot be considered entirely conservative in nature. For what a Wittgensteinian perspective implicitly underlines or shows is precisely the contingent nature of large areas of our current conceptual system.

As already noted, Wittgenstein himself tends to restrict consideration to those concepts we have because of the way the world or human beings are physically constituted. However, we are concerned with the underlying logic of Wittgenstein's social conception of language and its implications. In this sense, the range of significant hinge propositions need not be restricted to the examples Wittgenstein himself chooses for the purposes of illustration. Understood in this way, what a Wittgensteinian approach provides is a 'perspicuous representation' (*übersicht*) of the relative, contingent, and hence, in principle, replaceable nature of our key socio-political concepts and the particular language-games or form of life which they serve to underpin (On the importance of the concept of '*übersicht*' see Wittgenstein, (PI:§122), and Baker and Hacker, (1980:531-559)). In so doing, a Wittgensteinian perspective on language performs the valuably critical function of undercutting the ever-present tendency towards the reification of many of terms and concepts concerning the social and political such as 'democracy', 'the state', 'justice', etc.<sup>15</sup>

All of this constitutes further evidence of the frequently neglected non-conservative implications of a Wittgensteinian approach; a dimension generated ('shown') by the focus of the latter on the crucial role of language in human social and political life. Thus the apparently purely abstract epistemological concerns of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, developed in response to what he regarded as G.E. Moore's misguided critique of scepticism, have a number of equally important, though almost universally unexplored, implications for social and political philosophy.

Interestingly enough, Gellner himself, perhaps the arch-critic of any proposed application of a Wittgensteinian approach within the socio-political sphere, implicitly operates on the basis of a recognition of the saying-showing distinction in Wittgenstein's later writings. It is, however, a distinction which Gellner interprets one-dimensionally in line with the interests of his own particular critical agenda. This becomes evident, for example, in Gellner's assertion that: "Linguistic Philosophy...is conservative in the values which it in fact *insinuates*. Again it is not specifically conservative, not given to indicating the need to conserve this or that in particular, but conservative in a general, *unspecific* way. It refuses to undermine any accepted

habits, but, on the contrary, concentrates on *showing* that the reasons underlying criticisms of accepted habits are in general mistaken” (1979:246-247, emphases added).<sup>16</sup>

Gellner relies on a version of the saying-showing distinction but fail to acknowledge any of its non-conservative implications. Gellner’s procedure is thus an unwitting testimony to the politics of language. For his analysis is founded on an arbitrary conceptual closure: i.e., that linguistic philosophy, regardless of whether it ‘says’ or ‘shows’, *must* be conservative in its outcome. As Lugg’s discussion has illustrated, further examples of this one-dimensional interpretation of the saying/showing distinction, and the conservative conclusions drawn from it are to be found throughout the secondary literature. As Lugg correctly observes: “Of course, nobody holds that [Wittgenstein] advocated conservatism in the way that Burke or Disraeli did; the claim is rather that his thinking has a conservative cast. We are to think of him as *insinuating rather than stating* the preferability of conservatism and perhaps even as supplying it with a new and more profound rationale” (1985:465, emphasis added). By contrast, an all too rare recognition of the anti-conservative implications of the saying/showing distinction outlined above, is to be found in the writings of Rossi-Landi, although it is a point which is not sufficiently developed to any extent (see 1979:327).

The interpretational consequences of a failure to adequately consider the possible significance of a version of the saying/showing distinction in Wittgenstein’s later writings are frequently to be found in the secondary literature. Despite its undoubted value as a corrective against certain aspects of the predominant conservative interpretation of Wittgenstein, this is the case in the analysis of Easton (1983). In particular, during the course of her comments on the issue of conservatism she frequently tends to elide the crucial distinction between Wittgenstein, and a Wittgensteinian perspective *per se* on the socio-political (see, e.g., 1983:138ff).

The point becomes clearer when we consider the perplexity induced on the part of Easton by her difficulty in reconciling what she regards, on the one hand, as Wittgenstein’s ‘ahistorical’ focus on forms of life with, on the other, her recognition of “Wittgenstein’s obvious interest in the sociology of knowledge” (1983:138).

According to Easton: "Lacking a social theory to give an impetus to his primarily philosophical investigations, his examination ground to a halt at the nature of language, instead of progressing to a study of the specific historical conditions underpinning this alienation of the kind found in Marxism"(1983:140). However, the 'ahistorical' focus which Easton claims to detect is largely a surface feature. It has more to do with the style of Wittgenstein's particular formulation of the point rather than a failing of the underlying logic of a perspective on the social nature of language. The problem stems in large part from focusing solely on what is *said* rather than *shown* by Wittgenstein's writings. This is, however, effectively to criticise Wittgenstein the man for being the psychological, emotional and aesthetically attuned entity that he was, while ignoring the implications of a conception of language as irreducibly and consistently social.

Similarly, Conway (1989) is certainly correct in arguing that: "To describe a form of life would be to describe a culture: its class structure, how power was distributed, the way in which the satisfaction of basic needs was institutionalized, the methods employed in maintaining order, the art that flourished, and so on"(1989:48). However, the valuable points made during her analysis are later offset when Conway, rather confusingly, asserts that: "Wittgenstein does not speak of sociological facts but of forms of life that allow for the possibility of meaning"(1989:48). In a sense, of course, Conway is absolutely correct, for Wittgenstein does not explicitly refer in the conventional manner to what we might term 'sociological facts'. Nevertheless, such 'facts' are certainly part of what is entailed in Wittgenstein's concept of a form of life. This follows, as already argued, from Wittgenstein's social conception of language and the crucial links it highlights between language and concrete social practices.

Moreover, according to the logic of Conway's own argument, in particular her interpretation of the notion of a form of life as something which is not simply reducible to a biological datum, such sociological and political facts have to be seen as providing the concrete context which allows "for the possibility of meaning". Again, this becomes clear when we recall that, for Wittgenstein, the concept of a form of life is not to be construed solely in linguistic terms, but in the context of



concrete forms of social action and practices (see 1969:§204). Conway's discussion underlines the interpretational pitfalls accompanying any failure to take into due consideration the significance of the saying/showing distinction in approaching the later writings of Wittgenstein and their relevance for social science.

Other political implications stem from (or are 'shown by') a Wittgensteinian approach to language. Consider, for example, the pivotal role played by the concept of 'the community' in the later writings; in particular, the set of political issues stemming from the related construal by Wittgenstein of meaning in terms of the publicly verifiable uses of language. Such a perspective raises (in a manner, perhaps, essentially prefiguring the thought of Habermas) a whole range of questions concerning, among other things, the democratisation of linguistic input and access to the ongoing social determination of the meaning of the key terms and concepts with which we orient ourselves in the social world.

Such questions concern, in other words, the issue of whether or not the socio-political language-game is one which can be said to be played on an even field by equally empowered participants. As already noted, Wittgenstein himself does not explicitly raise such issues. However, I would argue that for humans living in the late twentieth century all of this is, in Wittgensteinian terms, part and parcel of what is entailed by the 'grammar' of the concept of the 'social'. It is consistent with Wittgenstein's stress on the relation between language and practices, and the insistence that language be viewed in the context of human actions, customs, and institutions. Just as Wittgenstein himself refused to remain content with the abstraction of the 'inner' in discussing the nature of language and rule-following, likewise we should question the picture generated by the abstract notions of 'the community' and the 'social'.

It might appear, of course, that to argue for the position outlined- i.e., to advocate the possibility of a critique of the existing distribution of linguistic (and hence ultimately political) opportunity of access and input to the various language-games - is necessarily to depart from a Wittgensteinian perspective which, it is frequently argued, is concerned solely with a *description* of our language. There are, however, a number of problems underlying this line of thought. Firstly, it assumes that



Wittgenstein's location of meaning within ordinary linguistic usage is a move which severely curtails, if not entirely negates, the critical conceptual resources of the latter. The idea is that an ordinary language perspective must rest content with the mere description of how language is currently used. However, chapter 9 challenges such assumptions and shows that this is not necessarily the case for a so-called ordinary language approach, properly conceived.

## Chapter 9

### Rethinking the Notion of 'Ordinary Language'

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Our conception of 'ordinary language' in the later writings of Wittgenstein has a crucial bearing on the evaluation of the political significance and implications of those writings. With this in mind, there are a number of reasons why the concept of 'ordinary language' as presently understood requires to be reconsidered. Firstly, the dominant conception of ordinary language is fundamentally ahistorical and apolitical. It ignores the key role played by history, 'tradition' and by dominant political interests all of which influence and determine the choice, formulation, and meaning of the concepts with which, as a society, we currently operate. As we shall see, recognition of such factors also strengthens the case for an extension of the 'bewitchment thesis' in Wittgenstein's later writings. The standard reading of this notion suggests that the so-called bewitchment of our intelligence by language is confined to philosophers. However, a proper reading of Wittgenstein's argument renders such a conclusion problematic and illustrates further the political significance of Wittgenstein's writings.

Secondly, this view of 'ordinary language' lends support to the conservative interpretation of a Wittgensteinian perspective. For the predominantly synchronic conception of ordinary language held by critics such as Marcuse (1964) ignores its potentially critical role as a conceptual repertoire providing a means and resource for countering the dominant interpretations of terms and concepts. Such problems are removed when we reconsider the concept of ordinary language within the context of Wittgenstein's discussion of the importance of gaining an 'overview' (*übersicht*) of language, and in terms of the distinction between 'depth' and 'surface grammar'. The following discussion thus focuses on what critics think is entailed by the

‘description’ of ‘ordinary language’ and the role this conception plays in the formulation of the conservative interpretation of a Wittgensteinian perspective.

Thirdly, while Wittgenstein’s later writings rightly view language as an irreducibly social phenomenon embedded within a network of human social practices, the precise nature of such practices is left undeveloped in sociological and political terms. Nowhere is this more apparent, perhaps, than in the case of the concept of ‘the community’. Here the dominant formulation of the concept of ordinary language implies a spurious egalitarianism. There is, in other words, a notion that the mass of the population somehow enjoy equal linguistic input and access to the process of meaning determination. It suggests a greater than actual degree of involvement on the part of the language-using community in both the historical and the ongoing processes through which the interpretation of concepts and what constitutes ordinary language as it applies to the sphere of the socio-political takes place. In developing the political dimensions of Wittgenstein’s perspective there is therefore a need to move beyond a minimalist formulation of the social embeddedness of language which tends to be expressed chiefly in epistemological terms.

### *9.1 Ordinary Language: Synchronic Versus Diachronic Readings*

What I want to argue in this chapter is that critics of a Wittgensteinian approach to political and social science operate with an unnecessarily narrow and restricted conception of the notion of ‘ordinary language’. It is one which more easily yields the apparently inescapable conclusion that such an approach is conservative in its implications. In particular, the conservative interpretation amounts to a reading of Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘ordinary language’ through Saussurean spectacles. For such interpretations implicitly operate on the assumption that a Wittgensteinian approach is committed to an essentially synchronic or ‘time-slice’ conception of ‘ordinary language’.

In this respect the dominant reading of the notion of ordinary language shares a lot in common with the Saussurean conception of *langue*. For critics of a Wittgensteinian perspective such as Marcuse (1964:170-171,176,191-193) and Gellner (1979:53,245), ‘ordinary language’ equals the ahistorical system of *langue*.

Such a view, however, is at odds with the diachronic, historical understanding underlying Wittgenstein's view of language. This is expressed in passages such as the following in which Wittgenstein insists: "We are talking about the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language, not about some non-temporal phantasm..." (PI §108). Similarly, according to Wittgenstein, from the perspective of an ordinary language approach, "What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" (PI §116). However, the fact that our words and concepts are able to operate as Wittgenstein puts it elsewhere "on holiday", indicates a degree of indeterminacy in our language which is inconsistent with the conservative interpretation of the concept of ordinary language as a fixed and static realm of meaning. Moreover, as Wittgenstein points out: "We are unable clearly to circumscribe the concepts we use; not because we don't know their real definition, but because there is no real 'definition' to them" (Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books*, p.25. quoted in Pitkin, 1993:90). (See also Wittgenstein, (1969:§§69,71), for a discussion of the particular misunderstanding of language which generates the demand for determinacy of sense).

An acknowledgement of this important aspect undercuts the one-dimensional and static conception of ordinary language presupposed by the conservative interpretation of Wittgenstein. Thus while it is the case that words and concepts clearly function as key elements within our current (synchronic) linguistic system, i.e., they play important roles within our ongoing social and political language-games, these are also elements, however, which have necessarily accumulated their own particular and rich histories of denotation, connotation, and association. It is these dimensions of language which are captured in Wittgenstein's concept of 'family resemblance' (PI §§65-71). As a result, such words and concepts cannot, contra Marcuse and Gellner, be construed in solely one-dimensional terms as the bearers and transmitters of fixed meanings which automatically reflect the interests of the status quo. In contrast to the predominantly synchronic reading relied on by critics, the emphasis on a more diachronically oriented conception of ordinary language is consistent, not only with certain key elements of Wittgenstein's later writings, such as the critique of the demand for determinacy of sense (PI §§69,71), and the key related notion of 'family

resemblance' but with the highlighting of the historical, and thus politically and socially contingent nature of our language and concepts.

The essential point to retain in this attempt to reconceptualise the notion of ordinary language is, ironically enough, perhaps captured most forcefully by the relational conception of meaning found in the writings of Saussure (1974), and noted in section I above. For Saussure, as we have already seen: "concepts are purely differential, not positively defined by their content but negatively defined by their relations with other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is that they are what the others are not"(1974:117).

The passage from Saussure bears an interesting similarity to the point made by Wittgenstein in the *Blue Book*. According to Wittgenstein: "The sign...gets its significance from the system of signs, from the language to which it belongs"(1969a:5). Thus, in what can be regarded as an early or proto-formulation of the concept of 'family resemblance', we have in the later writings of Wittgenstein a version of the relational conception of meaning as found in Saussure. However, as argued in section I, this is a notion which is not construed by Wittgenstein solely in synchronic terms, as is the case in Saussure's analysis. For Wittgenstein, understanding the meaning of particular words or concepts depends on an understanding, not of their abstract differential relations within the context of an ahistorical and asocial system, but of their uses, and hence the various ways in which they resemble and differ from other words and concepts, within a language-game which is part of a form of life. Thus while we might speak analogously of the existence of a 'system' with respect to the Wittgensteinian conception of language, it is, however, one which is fundamentally social in its focus on concrete human practices within a historical context.

The notion of an 'ordinary-language' perspective therefore need not be construed, as it usually is by critics of a Wittgensteinian approach, in a narrow atemporal manner, i.e., restricted to a purely definitional explication of the dominant or currently established linguistic usage of terms and concepts whose meanings are strictly delimited or fixed (see e.g., Marcuse, 1964:177-178).<sup>17</sup> Rather, a Wittgensteinian perspective on ordinary language encompasses the diachronic level

in which the meanings of words and concepts are revealed historically as sites of political contestation. As already suggested, this line of reasoning is consonant with other aspects of Wittgenstein's writings such as the notions of family resemblance (PI §§65-71) and indeterminacy of sense (1969:§§69,71). Such textual factors, however, remain anomalous on the purely synchronic reading of the concept of ordinary language.

Undercutting the purely synchronic conception of ordinary language also opens up its potential as a critical conceptual resource, rather than the 'prison house' conjured up by Marcuse's analysis (1964:170,177). In this respect, Pocock, provides a useful illustration of the potential significance of an enlarged, and historically enriched conception of the notion and role of 'ordinary language' in the sphere of the political. As Pocock points out:

Political statements are such that they may convey more than one meaning and be of more than one order; they are made up of terms of many origins, bearing many possible implications....[a] document can always be made to yield more information than it overtly conveys, more even than its maker intended to convey...The author of a political statement may intend to be ambiguous; he is employing a language by its nature inherently ambiguous; but because the language and the range of its ambiguities are given him by society and exist in a context of use and meaning whose multivalency he cannot expect to control, his statement may convey meanings to others (especially after the processes of linguistic change have had time to proceed some way) outside of any range of ambiguity he may have intended" (1972b:23).

The concept of ordinary language therefore needs to be recognised as a critical resource capable of countering the kind of bewitchment identified by Wittgenstein's writings. This, however, is difficult if we accept the static, synchronic conception of ordinary language depicted by critics such as Marcuse. As we have seen, the critical dimensions of the concept can, however, be preserved. Rather than being viewed in purely synchronic terms along the lines of Saussure's concept of a language system (*langue*), the notion of ordinary language can also be seen in diachronic, i.e., historical and therefore ultimately social and political terms.

Yet, according to Bell: "If contemporary political science terminology is poverty-stricken, everyday language represents an embarrassment of riches...our everyday language furnishes us with a rather comprehensive set of linguistic symbols to help us pick our way through the complex maze of political relationships"(1975:9). Bell's assertions, however, only become valid given the adoption of a more enriched diachronic conception of ordinary language. Bell, in other words, is too sanguine in his reliance on a 'surface grammar' or predominantly synchronic reading of the concept of ordinary language. Like that of Kitching (1994:126,244), Bell's conception ignores the possibility that many of the politically significant terms and concepts currently furnished by ordinary language will tend to reflect the dominant ideology of the society concerned. By contrast, a more historically-oriented conception of ordinary language represents a move away from the implicit apoliticism of the conception of ordinary language viewed as a homogenous, shared product of all, regardless of race, class or gender. As Mouffe argues:

Th[e] conception of tradition found in Gadamer can be made more specific and complex if reformulated in terms of Wittgenstein's 'language games'. Seen in this light, tradition becomes the set of language games that make up a given community...Thus we are able to think of politics as the pursuit of intimations, which in a Wittgensteinian perspective can be understood as the creation of new usages for the key terms of a given tradition, and of their use in new language games that make new forms of life possible (1993:17).

In referring to the tendency among certain commentators to detect only upper-class ideology in ordinary language, di Norcia comments: "Of course OLP [ordinary language philosophy] has represented a propaganda victory of upper-class talk over the levelling realism of plain people's language. *But both usages are part of ordinary language*"(1975:25 emphasis added). When considered in conjunction with the argument concerning the existence of philosophical and ideological themes within ordinary language the points raised by Mouffe and di Norcia are important. They help once again to undercut the standard interpretation of ordinary language as a hermetically sealed domain of uncritical linguistic and conceptual 'one-



dimensionality'. In this sense it is supportive of the diachronic, and hence intrinsically political conception of ordinary language argued for in the present work. As di Norcia argues: "...examining the full range of genuinely ordinary usages can lead to the criticism of established usages (or uses) as ideological..."(1975:26). Here, I would argue, di Norcia implicitly touches on the significance of the Wittgensteinian notion of an *übersicht* conceived in more than merely synchronic terms.

Properly understood then, the Wittgensteinian notion of the 'description' of language use is never merely about language itself. As Garver points out: "Studying uses of language makes context prominent"(1996:150). To describe language use is also to become aware of the various ways in which words and concepts have been and can be used. In particular, it is to become aware of the context, the social and political networks of human practices, which render particular words and concepts rather than others intelligible. The pluralist connotations, the 'grammar' of conceiving language in terms of 'use', therefore has an implicitly critical force. In this sense, Wittgenstein's concrete contextualisation of language use stands as an implicit critique of hegemonic strategies which seek to monopolise and universalise the meaning and reference of concepts such as 'freedom' and 'justice'.

This chapter has emphasised the connection between a focus on the non-synchronic dimension of 'ordinary language', and the critical resources associated with the notion of a linguistic and conceptual tradition. Wittgenstein's conception of ordinary language and the focus on meaning as use are compatible with the idea of a linguistic and conceptual tradition which contains as part of its resources the basis of a 'critical consciousness', the existence of which undermines the univocality of meaning presupposed by the conservative synchronic reading of 'ordinary language'. The Wittgensteinian concept of family-resemblance, and the critique of the demand for determinacy of sense can be viewed as important elements in undercutting the equation of an 'ordinary language' perspective with conservatism.

The consequences of a failure, if not to reconceive, then at least to critically question the standard reading of the notion of ordinary language in Wittgenstein's writings are evident in the analysis of commentators such as Flathman (1973). In his discussion and interpretation of the meaning-as-use theme Flathman argues: "To

know the meaning of a concept is not to know something other than, something in addition to, or something hidden beneath what speakers of the language do with it. Rather, *it is to know just what they know, to have the knowledge they display and act upon in their day-to-day communication with one another*”(1973:4, emphasis added).

Flathman’s argument is potentially misleading insofar as his conception of what constitutes ordinary language is essentially synchronically oriented. As such, it generates an unduly restrictive and impoverished notion of the concept. Without due recognition of the diachronic dimension, the critical potential of the concept of ordinary language, as captured in the notion of a historically accrued conceptual and grammatical resource available to political actors, is greatly underestimated. Flathman, in other words, operates with a conception of ordinary language identical to that characterised as authentically Wittgensteinian and subsequently criticised by Marcuse (1964:170-199).<sup>18</sup> What Flathman’s analysis overlooks is the important Wittgensteinian concept of ‘family resemblance’ and the role it plays in undermining the one-dimensionality and fixity of linguistic and conceptual usage implied in such accounts (see e.g., Wittgenstein, PI 77).

## 9.2 *Description Versus Explanation*

According to its critics, one of the chief failings of any so-called ‘ordinary-language’ approach to social science is its allegedly sole concern with *description*, as opposed to *explanation*. It is a perspective, it is argued, concerned merely with a description of the use of language. As we have seen, it is frequently assumed in critical interpretations and discussions of the political significance of a Wittgensteinian approach that the process is one which must ultimately terminate in an uncritically quietistic description of how words are used in everyday ordinary language. A lot clearly turns here on what is, and what is not, held to be entailed by the process of ‘description’. However, as already argued, to ‘describe’ as a Wittgensteinian approach does, the various uses of language and concepts and the circumstances and contexts within which they operate, is also to point towards (or ‘show’) their contingent basis within current socio-political arrangements or forms of life.

In other words, the apparent justification and sanctification of the linguistic and conceptual status quo allegedly conferred by a Wittgensteinian perspective is just that - apparent. What a Wittgensteinian approach underlines is the fact that language is socially and not transcendently grounded. The language and the concepts we have reflect their role as products of the contingent historical, social and political arrangements of society. Thus any 'justification' given on the one hand via a 'grounding' achieved through the identification of meaning with so-called ordinary usage, is simultaneously undercut on the other through a recognition of the contingent social and political networks of practices which have made the emergence of such language possible. In this sense we can agree with Rossi-Landi, who argues it is perfectly reasonable to regard the act of linguistic description itself as a form of political intervention (1979:339).

In addition, Wittgenstein does not, as is frequently suggested on the conservative interpretation, simply award common sense as expressed in our 'everyday ordinary language' a privileged and critically immune status. As Lugg argues, such a view conflicts with Wittgenstein's stated aim of providing 'perspicuous representations' (an *übersicht*) of how we think and behave - an orientation with far more critical implications than a merely synchronic focus on 'ordinary language' would suggest. Wittgenstein, as Lugg points out: "does not think that common sense provides us with an alternative, more adequate theory of how things are....Consider Wittgenstein's polemic against the Cartesian conception of the self as fixed and the mind as transparent. It is hardly plausible to see him as attempting to demystify this widely held view by re-familiarizing us with the metaphysics embedded in common sense. For, as Wittgenstein was only too well aware, the metaphysics of common sense is thoroughly Cartesian in spirit"(1985:469).

Thus a major problem with the conservative interpretation of a Wittgensteinian perspective is that Wittgenstein's own project is not merely descriptively quietistic in either its intent or implications. As Wittgenstein wrote: "I am in a sense making propaganda for one style of thinking as opposed to another...much...[of what I am] doing is persuading the people to change their style of thinking"(1966:28, quoted in Conway, 1989:159). As Conway argues: "Wittgenstein cannot be said to maintain

finally that we are to leave everything truly as it is”(1989:159). In establishing the point Conway, in common with Lugg, notes Wittgenstein’s critique of the Cartesian metaphysical model of mind, as well as his undermining of the view of language underlying and generating the Augustinian and Tractarian conceptions of meaning (1989:160). All of the foregoing represent, for Wittgenstein, examples of various ‘pictures’ found within our language and which are capable of ‘holding us captive’. Thus a Wittgensteinian perspective, it must reasonably be assumed, is involved at the very least in the implicit exposure and critique of such pictures, however obliquely such a critique may initially have been enunciated by Wittgenstein himself. As McCumber points out:

Wittgenstein’s own practice in the *Philosophical Investigations* is...not purely descriptive. It diverges from description, in fact, in two ways. First, it contains, for therapeutic purposes, a comparative dimension. Metaphysical uses of words must be traced back to—that is, compared with and differentiated from—ordinary uses. There are thus, we might say, at least three separate language games at play in a piece of Wittgenstein’s philosophical analysis: the metaphysical language game in which a word is given an essentialistic meaning, the ordinary game in which it does not have that meaning, and the therapeutic game in which the analysis is conducted (1993:339).

A Wittgensteinian perspective thus alerts us to the potential distortions of thought produced by an uncritical acceptance of the ‘surface grammar’ of our language. As already suggested, this is underlined by Wittgenstein’s critique of ‘mentalese’, and the underlying Cartesian conception of mind and the nature of philosophy itself. All of this highlights Wittgenstein’s version of ‘critique’; one which operates through the ‘description’ and uncovering of the various and generally unquestioned ‘pictures’ contained within ordinary language. In short, any characterisation of a Wittgensteinian perspective as the conservative defender of the “established universe of discourse”(Marcuse, 1964:170) stands in stark contrast to the actual nature of Wittgenstein’s project of alerting us to the danger stemming from “the bewitchment of our intelligence by language”(PI §109).

Recognition of the significance of the issue of 'description' for the interpretation of Wittgenstein's writings is also found in the debate between Hervey (1961,1963), and Carney (1963).

As Hervey argues:

I agree with Wittgenstein that ordinary language carries theoretical implications, and it seems most important to be clear about this. It seems equally clear that if we disagree with any implications we find (or believe we find), and introduce all sorts of other 'possibilities of expression'...then we are no longer merely 'looking' at ordinary language and 'describing' what we find there...We are doing *much* more than merely describing. We are criticising, suggesting, innovating, and I consider that Wittgenstein was often in fact engaged in such activities. On such occasions his philosophical procedure comes into conflict with the philosophical technique he so forcibly advocates...(1963:175).

However, Hervey's otherwise valuable account equivocates over whether this linking of description with criticism is the result of a failure on the part of Wittgenstein himself, or whether neutral and critically inconsequential description *per se* is an impossibility (1963:171). Any affirmation of the latter conclusion clearly has important implications for the conservative interpretation of Wittgenstein's writings. This is due to the reliance of the latter on a strict conceptual dichotomy in terms of both nature and consequences between description and explanation. Maxwell and Feigl are also sceptical with respect to the possibility of neutral descriptions, regarding apparent examples of the latter as often little more than "disguised reformations"(1957:194) (See also Connolly, (1974:23-25;182-184) where this line of thought receives support, and where the issue is related more directly to the sphere of the socio-political). According to Hacker:

it could be said that philosophy explains, for it is part of Wittgenstein's prognosis for philosophical illusion that we be brought to our senses by examining intermediate cases in order that we grasp connections. Revealing

conceptual connections, which were not hitherto explicit or articulated even though they are an integral part of our linguistic practice, seems as legitimate a sense of 'explain' as any. Moreover, not only does Wittgenstein explain, in this loose sense, in order to rid us of illusion. He also explains, in great detail and profundity, the multifarious sources and processes which generate philosophical illusion (1975:119).

The upshot of Hacker's argument is that, in line with Wittgenstein's own approach, we should not construe the concept of 'explanation' in one-dimensional or essentialist terms. Rather, the notion should be viewed as a 'family resemblance' concept sharing certain features with both the nomological-deductive conception of explanation and with the notion of description itself. It is also, more importantly, a question of attempting to understand the ways in which political and social agents in receipt of the relevant 'description' of their linguistic and conceptual practices will, in cognitive terms, assimilate and 'use' such information in the process of understanding and acting within various social situations. The crucial issue, in other words, is whether any such description will be treated and acted on as a *de facto* or shorthand form of explanation with the possible implications which might flow from its recognition as such.

Contrary to the conservative interpretation of a Wittgensteinian perspective, the act of description and its consequences cannot be neatly delineated from the act or process of explanation. It seems dogmatic to assert that no political consequences will follow either in the short or long term from the act of description. It is, however, almost universally assumed by critics of a Wittgensteinian approach that any such consequences as there are will necessarily be entirely conservative in outcome. If, however, as Wittgenstein suggests, we are involved in describing the various ways in which terms and concepts have been, are, and can be used, then this form of activity itself cannot be regarded as a socially or politically neutral one, for it has at the very least the important consequence of undercutting essentialism, and thereby underlining the contingency of current definitions and linguistic usage.

In PI §464 Wittgenstein writes: "My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense". Such passages are difficult to square with the conception and criticism of an ordinary language perspective as



‘mere description’. As the passage indicates, something important has occurred by the end of the so-called descriptive process. In this sense, the aim and outcome of Wittgenstein’s procedure in fact seems indistinguishable from what might be termed the standard Enlightenment-inspired critique of ideology or mystification associated with the ‘uncovering’ of that previously ‘disguised’ or taken for granted such as the concept of the ‘divine right of kings’.

As Hacker points out with regard to the oft-quoted dictum of Wittgenstein’s that ‘philosophy leaves everything as it is’: “To be sure language is, by and large, left as it is...But those regions of our thought previously obscure to us and now perspicuously surveyed do not remain the same. Or, if one wishes, *the fact that we see them differently will lead to our treating them differently*”(1975:125 emphasis added). With regard to the same passage in Wittgenstein's writings Baker and Hacker argue:

...taken out of context this might be taken to intimate the impotence of philosophy. In context, however, it is clear that this is a further gloss on the first sentence of §124. ‘Everything’ here refers to the use of language, i.e. grammar. It is not the task of philosophy to change the grammar of our language, but only to describe it, and thereby to curb our constant temptation to misconstrue it. *It does not, of course, follow that the clarity of an Übersicht, which it is the goal of philosophy to achieve, will not have any effect on our non-philosophical activities* (1983:236, emphasis added).

In a similar vein, Monk argues: “Wittgenstein's remark about philosophy - that it ‘leaves everything as it is’ - is often quoted. But it is less often realized that, in seeking to change nothing but how we look at things, Wittgenstein was attempting to change *everything*”(Wittgenstein: *The Duty of Genius*, p.533, quoted in Genova, 1995:208n.19). Such points suggest that the characterisation of an ordinary language perspective as a merely descriptive and inconsequential enterprise is, at best, a highly problematic one.

In an interesting passage Benton argues: “...this task of describing language-games is not such an innocent exercise as it sounds...It is one thing to be a language-user, quite another to be able to give an adequate account of the uses of language”(1976:4). Benton’s main point is that even in describing the use of language we may still be misled by its ‘surface grammar’. His comment, I believe, also has wider significance



and supports an anti-conservative reading of Wittgenstein insofar as it highlights the need to consider the 'depth grammar' of language, i.e., the role of language in concrete social practices. This involves going beyond 'ordinary language', at least in the sense used by critics of Wittgenstein such as Marcuse. I take Benton's point, that is, to be a useful one in underlining the need for a richer, diachronic conception of ordinary language, i.e., one which recognises that meanings and connotations proliferate beyond the confines of contemporary 'established usage'. To this extent it challenges the notion of an 'ordinary language' perspective as conventionally understood.

Wittgenstein's allegedly strict adherence to the dichotomy between explanation and description is also in tension with the logic of his argument concerning 'use'. For Wittgenstein, the injunction to focus on the 'uses' of words entails more than a concern with mere grammar as traditionally understood. It involves understanding the role which words and concepts play, and are capable of playing, within particular language-games or a form of life, i.e., within the context of a nexus of linguistic and non-linguistic social practices. The 'description' of how words and concepts are used therefore also denotes and presupposes a description of the social practices and institutions which constitute such a context.

Central to the issue of the relation between the concepts of explanation and description is the question of what it is that an explanation provides which a description allegedly does not. As a rough approximation, we can say that implicit within the notion of explanation standardly adopted by Wittgenstein's critics is the demand for an account of *why* something exists, i.e., an account which may be given, for example, in historical and causal terms, as opposed to a mere description *that* something exists. But then, we might ask, if description provides none of this how is it actually able to function? I want to argue that there is in fact an implicitly assumed background operative within the standard account of the logic of description which accounts for the fact that 'mere description' often suffices.

In this sense Wittgenstein's own 'description' of the language-game of 'the builders' (PI §2) only works for us due to the role played by a tacit knowledge of the social and political structures of the situation. It is in fact a form of disguised

explanation. Consider, for example, the giving and receiving of orders between the two builders. It is the implicit recognition of a hierarchical set of power relations here which renders intelligible the description of the interaction between the builders. The fact that 'slab' means 'bring me a slab' is explained for us because we are able to place the word in the context of our understanding of a particular set of social relations. Even if we suppose no such hierarchical structure, and envisage the builders to be engaged in a mutually reciprocal or altruistic form of relationship the point remains the same: the 'description' of how words and concepts are used is parasitic on an understanding or implicit explanation of the social practices and political structures which facilitate this.

In PI §120 Wittgenstein compares the meaning of a word with money and its uses. As is the case with money, the 'description' of words presupposes an implicit explanatory background i.e., an understanding on the part of the agent concerned of the social and political system within which the word is able to function meaningfully. Anything less would fail to correspond to a proper 'description' of its 'depth grammar'. In other words, there can be no mere 'description' of the use of a term or concept which is not also in some significant sense an 'explanation' of its role within this system or background. Remember also that, for Wittgenstein, whatever is required in order to remove the puzzlement is case-specific. In most cases, mere 'description' may be sufficient. But this is only because an explanation of the background practices and institutions within which the term or concept concerned functions has already been gained through the gradual osmotic process of language learning which is a key feature of the broader process of political socialization.

One result of the process of political socialization is the provision of an explanatory background against which apparently merely descriptive accounts of terms and concepts are able to function. Thus to describe the use of the term 'democratic' as in the phrase 'country A is democratic' only works as a 'description' - i.e., we are not, in Wittgensteinian terms, encouraged to 'dig deeper' - because we already know, or are capable of constructing for ourselves on the basis of knowledge already gained, a plausible yet tacitly explanatory account of what such a description

means, i.e., country A is 'democratic' because, in contrast to the arrangements of feudal society, every five years elections are held etc.

This merely underlines the Wittgensteinian point that humans learn more than mere words when they learn a language. They also learn the social contexts in which these are used. They learn, through a long process of political socialisation, the dominant explanations of key terms such as 'democracy' etc. It is this background of tacit explanation which renders consequent 'descriptions' involving such terms intelligible. As Bennett argues: "The symbols, myths, and inference paradigms of political culture are the most universally experienced and shared political referents. *It is unlikely that any other force in the polity so strongly conveys information to the mass public about 'what goes with what' in the political world*"(1975:164, emphasis added).

Consideration of the way in which the concept of 'explanation' has historically been treated also serves to problematise the allegedly strict dichotomy between the latter and that of description. That is to say, in discussing the significance of the alleged dichotomy we are perhaps misled by an overly scientific conception of what 'explanation' entails in the sphere of the socio-political. The conservative interpretation of a Wittgensteinian perspective implicitly presumes, for example, that we can only found a critical social science on the basis of a concept of explanation in line with the deductive nomological reasoning of the covering law model. This, however, is a particularly narrow conception and assumes that only strict deductive reasoning has persuasive and thus political impact. Since we are after all concerned primarily with the political implications of the process of description we should perhaps look to an understanding of the concept of 'explanation' more in keeping with the tradition of political rhetoric.

The latter is the area which is arguably most relevant to the question at hand - namely, understanding how socially-situated, language-using political agents process and act on information; regardless of whether such information conforms to a narrowly scientific conception of explanation, or to the less formal, less deductively rigorous standards presupposed by the enthymemic conception of reasoning and persuasion. The latter would seem in fact to be the style employed by Wittgenstein

himself in his later writings. What this suggests is that the allegedly strict dichotomy between explanation and description relied on by the conservative interpretation of a Wittgensteinian perspective is largely irrelevant in political terms.

### 9.3 *Political Implications of 'Description'*

The possible political consequences of comparing and noting varying uses of key concepts across time and between cultures can be envisaged in at least some of the following ways: (1) As an illustration of the historical and cultural contingency of such terms and concepts, thereby simultaneously undercutting their universalist pretensions; (2) As a possible reinforcement of currently dominant interpretations of those key concepts found within one's own form of life. (This may possibly arise due to the fact that 'uses' are not viewed or catalogued *sub specie aeternitatis* or in an isolated fashion, but from within the particular value-frame of a form of life); (3) Information concerning the varied or uniform uses or use of particular words and concepts is not something which can credibly be viewed as hermetically sealed and rigidly compartmentalised in cognitive terms. Rather, such information is taken in and an attempt made to integrate or reconcile this with existing ideas. Clearly a lot depends on the amount of exposure to, and the level of reinforcement of, the information concerned. However, even where, following some particular act of description, there is no apparent change of political consciousness on the part of the agent concerned, there is still the political consequence of the maintenance of the status quo.

A Wittgensteinian perspective on the issue would also stress the various uses which this kind of knowledge may have for different people with different projects. It thus undercuts the *a priori* assumption on the part of critics such as Marcuse and Gellner that all description will be either entirely inconsequential or conservatively reinforcing. Consider once again the fact that, for Wittgenstein, to describe how a word is used involves locating the latter within the nexus of human linguistic and non-linguistic actions, customs and institutions. It is questionable whether this can be done, however, without in some sense departing from the minimalist conception of description implicitly presupposed by critics of Wittgenstein. Suppose, for example,

that in countries A, B, and C, but not in ours, the concept of 'democracy' as generally understood entails a far greater level of economic equality and decision-making on the part of the populace, rather than merely an abstract commitment to forms of parliamentary representation. Would our receipt of a description of this differing use of the term be cognitively and politically inconsequential? An affirmative reply would appear to undermine a central element in the logic of comparative politics, i.e., that what we learn from the study of other contexts has relevance and implications for our own practices and institutions.

According to Wittgenstein: "The clarity we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should completely disappear"(PI §133). The 'philosophical problems' in question stem largely from the mistaken notion that terms and concepts always function in the same way. Wittgenstein's main concern in such passages is thus with a critique of the Tractarian tendency to dig for a common 'essence'. Despite the nature of Wittgenstein's approach which tends to delimit the critical implications of the process to the sphere of philosophy itself, it also fits in with the argument in favour of a depth grammar approach focusing on the socio-political structures and practices surrounding language. Achieving 'clarity' from this perspective entails understanding the particular context and practices which render intelligible particular uses of terms and concepts such as 'freedom' and 'democracy' etc. In line with Wittgenstein's general methodological injunction we should not stop at the surface grammar of terms and concepts. For underlying human linguistic actions are human political and social arrangements.

#### 9.4 'Grammar'

The grammar of our practices is not, however, immediately evident and surveyable. As Wittgenstein notes, the understanding required for the removal of puzzlement requires an overview (übersicht) of the various contexts of language use. According to Wittgenstein: "A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not command a clear view of the use of our words. - Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity"(PI §122). As Hacker notes: "Although grammar in general, in Wittgenstein's sense of the term, will not be allowed to rise above a certain level of complexity, *it rarely if ever falls to a level of straightforward unambiguous and obvious surveyability...Grammar is not embodied in a static instantly surveyable medium*, but is the structure of our dynamic linguistic practices"(1975:115, emphasis added).

Hacker's point supports the argument for a more diachronic conception of ordinary language. The fact that the grammar of our language is not instantly or synchronically surveyable runs counter to the notion of 'ordinary language' relied on by critics such as Marcuse and Gellner. With respect to political terms and concepts a survey or übersicht would correspond to a historical and political survey revealing the varying uses of language and their contexts. It is, in other words, a perspective transcending the standard reading of ordinary language. The latter conception assumes that ordinary language is a homogenous structure in which meaning is fixed one-dimensionally. The Wittgensteinian concept of an übersicht of language use is in fact an implicit critique of the fixed established universe of discourse which Marcuse depicts.

The concept of grammar is also important insofar as it registers a limitation on those hegemonic strategies of articulation and disarticulation which writers such as Laclau, Mouffe and Hall wish to emphasise. Some of Wittgenstein's statements on the concept of grammar are, however, open to a misreading which lends support to the credibility of such strategies. In one passage, for example, Wittgenstein writes that: "Grammar is not accountable to any reality"(*Philosophical Grammar*, p.184, quoted in Finch, 1995:42). Such remarks have to be seen, however, in the context of Wittgenstein's ongoing critique of Tractarian thought. Thus the 'reality' in question



to which grammar is not accountable is the Tractarian conception of timeless ontological reality, not the social reality and constraints represented by the network of human linguistic and non-linguistic actions. It is this network which Wittgenstein's later writings focus on as the basis of meaning, and which the notion of 'grammar' is used to illuminate.

As Danford notes: "The grammar of a word might be said to include all the various expressions in which we can use the word, and the situations in which these are suitable. It is not simply a verbal matter, but encompasses situations, contexts, and activities in the *world*"(1978:111). Danford's point provides a useful contrast between the postmodern and the Wittgensteinian conception of grammar and the way this in turn relates to the differing conceptions of 'context'. In the case of postmodernism, due to the influence of Saussure, the conception of context is conceived in essentially semiotic terms; while in the Wittgensteinian it is irreducibly social.

Section IV of the study shows how this line of thought can be extended to cover the resistance of the terms and concepts which Thatcherism tried and failed to disarticulate or hegemonise. The key point here is that the concept and treatment of 'grammar' in Wittgenstein's writings is inextricably bound up with an appreciation of language as embedded in networks of concrete social practices. In this way grammar imposes constraints on the strategies of disarticulation or rearticulation which form such a key part of the writings of theorists such as Rorty, Lyotard, Laclau, Mouffe and Hall. Wittgenstein's is a socially (and, ultimately, politically) contextualized conception of 'grammar', in contrast to those readings of the notion which stem from the influence of the Saussurean paradigm of language.

As Wittgenstein's perspective on language indicates, the process of description does not stop at a 'surface grammar' level. Rather, it proceeds to a 'depth grammar' level of description of the social practices and institutions which constitute the context of language use. To properly describe how terms and concepts are used requires a description of their use which is in fact indistinguishable from an explanation of the matrix of human social practices and institutions within which they operate.



### 9.5 Wittgenstein and the Constitutive Dimension of Language

Specht (1969) refers to the distinction between Wittgenstein's early and later conceptions of the language / world relationship. According to Specht the former represents a 'Correspondence Theory', and the latter a 'Constitution Theory' of language (1969:25). As Specht puts it: "...the atomic model [of the *Tractatus*] presupposes a world of given objects, in the Realist sense, to which a multiplicity of linguistic symbols is unambiguously allied. In this way the atomic model thus implies a certain Correspondence or Picture Theory of language. By way of contrast, [on] the language-game model...we have to do with a linguistic 'Constitution Theory', in which language is not derived from the world of objects but is somehow involved in the construction of objects"(1969:25).

Specht's interpretation is supported by a number of remarks made by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*, where, for example, it is argued "Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar)"(PI §373). Similarly, what might be termed the 'constitutive' dimension of language is apparent in the following passage where Wittgenstein writes: "...'This is how things are' - That is the kind of proposition that one repeats to oneself countless times. One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing around the frame through which we look at it"(PI§114). The theme appears again in Wittgenstein's statement: "*Essence* is expressed by grammar"(PI § 371). In the following paragraph Wittgenstein goes on: "Consider: The only correlate in language to an intrinsic necessity is an arbitrary rule. It is the only thing which one can milk out of this intrinsic necessity into a proposition"(PI §372). The constitutive theme also appears elsewhere in Wittgenstein's writings: "I say, however; if you talk about essence, you are merely noting a convention"(Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics, 1:§74). Again, as Wittgenstein writes: "Concepts lead us to make investigations; are the expression of our interests, and direct our interest"(PI §570).

The important point to note in all of this is Wittgenstein's recognition of the constitutive dimension of our language, in the sense that language "direct[s] our interest"(See also PI §§569,572). Such passages illustrate the inadequacy of any characterisation of Wittgenstein as a 'positivist' or 'ordinary language' philosopher

in the derogatory sense in which such expressions are often used. Equally, however, what separates Wittgenstein's writings from those of poststructuralism and postmodernism is that Wittgenstein's 'constitutive' conception of language is one constrained by a recognition of social practices, and by a recognition that not all areas of our language and concepts are equally open to Rortyan notions of 'redescription', or to the hegemonic strategies of 'disarticulation' focused on by Laclau, Mouffe and Hall.

### 9.6 *'Bewitchment'*

Philosophical problems, according to Wittgenstein, are rooted in "a misunderstanding of the logic of our language"(PI §93). As Wittgenstein puts it: "We are engaged in a struggle with language"(1980:11). The concept of the bewitchment of our intelligence by language is thus a key theme in Wittgenstein's later writings. However, for various reasons Wittgenstein's formulation of the issue is one which, from a socio-political perspective, remains at an abstract level. Beyond being informed that philosophical puzzlement somehow arises primarily from a misunderstanding of the 'logic of our language', we are pretty much left in the dark as to what this might mean in more concrete social and political terms.

There is thus a need for an extension and development of the Wittgensteinian notion of the 'bewitchment of our intelligence by language' since the standard interpretation obscures the operation of a process of political significance. A consistent development of Wittgenstein's conception of language, in particular the socially-embedded nature of language within networks of human practices, shows that we are actually engaged, not simply in a struggle with 'language', but in a struggle with the social forces and practices which sustain particular linguistic habits, terms and concepts.

The question of whether the 'bewitchment' stemming from the misunderstanding of language is confined solely to philosophers or whether it affects all language users has an important bearing on the question of the relation between the notion of ordinary language and ideology. The standard response to this line of thought of course is to say that, for Wittgenstein, 'pictures' and 'puzzlement' only arise for

philosophers who often come to view terms and concepts in an abstract way i.e., outside of what Wittgenstein terms their use in the 'stream of life'. Thus users of ordinary language, it is held, do not encounter such puzzlement since they are not in the habit of reflecting on language itself. As Cornforth insists: "...the problems exist only for the philosopher, whereas the actual uses of language, if only we examine them carefully enough, involve no such problems"(1965:149).

However, we are left with the problem of squaring this type of response with Wittgenstein's already noted stress on the constitutive role of grammar. As we have seen, according to Wittgenstein: "Grammar tells us what kinds of things things are"(*Philosophical Remarks*, p.74, quoted in Finch, 1995:42). This suggests that whether we reflect on language or not we nevertheless view the world the way we do as a result of the grammar we have. As Wittgenstein's critique of the widespread Cartesian-inspired conception of our 'inner mental processes' illustrates, the system of ordinary language is capable of harbouring a number of conceptions which in Wittgenstein's view are mistaken and potentially misleading. To this extent Cornforth, along with commentators such as Kitching (1994:126,244), is blind here to the possibility of an implicit politics or ideology concealed within the grammar of ordinary language.

According to Kitching, language "is our obedient and almost infinitely flexible servant, so long as we use it unself-consciously in the context of all the other practices that make up our lives. But it can become - indeed, almost always does become - the most tyrannical and quixotic of masters the moment that we reflect upon it"(1994:244). Clearly a lot turns here on how the notion of 'reflection' is construed. Abstract and acontextual reflection on language as exemplified in questions such as "what is time" is of course Wittgenstein's chief target. However, at the most basic level it is clear that even a consideration of the uses of language - without which the later Wittgensteinian approach would be empty - itself represents, albeit in a minimalist sense, a form of 'reflection' on language, as does the related notion of an *übersicht*. Contrary to Kitching's assertion, then, matters are, in fact, precisely the other way around. What Kitching's analysis effectively does is to

depoliticise some of the important implications stemming from Wittgenstein's later writings – in this case, the relationship between ordinary language and ideology.

For Wittgenstein, ordinary language is both the source of, and the cure for, the bewitchment of our intelligence by language. Recognition of this point redresses the balance of interpretation which tends to emphasise the notion of ordinary language solely as the source of the *cure* for philosophical puzzlement or bewitchment. On this reading it is thus only philosophers who are in danger of being misled by language. However, if we can be misled by the Cartesian paradigm embedded within ordinary language, then the same line of thought holds good for concepts of a more directly political nature. Certain 'pictures', in other words, are capable of 'holding captive' not merely philosophers, but 'ordinary citizens' as well. As Wittgenstein acknowledges: "Language contains the same traps for everyone..."(TS 213, quoted in McGinn, 1997:21). Consider, to take again perhaps the most well-worn example, the term 'democracy'. The fact that the majority of the population are unable in modern society (at least as presently constituted) to fully participate in all of the various language-games and practices of a form of life, means that of necessity they frequently operate with what Wittgenstein terms 'super-concepts'(PI §97), such as 'democracy', etc.

To operate with, or to be subject to, the dominant conception of what constitutes the latter notion - i.e., to construe the concept as encapsulating merely the opportunity to vote in elections once every four or five years - is to be subject to the dominant ideology which views such concepts in a conveniently minimalist, abstract and formal manner. It is, in other words, to fall prey to a form of conceptual essentialism - to believe that there exists one correct definition of the notion. To this extent unreflective speakers of ordinary language are unaware of the history, and thus the potentially contestable nature, of such key concepts. This line of reasoning is supported by Wittgenstein's recognition that we know, for example, what 'time' is until someone asks us (PI §92). In other words, we operate on the basis of an understanding of terms and concepts, but one which is unexamined and the product of a particular socialization and training.

Similar considerations apply to concepts such as 'justice', 'freedom', etc. The point is that the unexamined adoption of such concepts has consequences in terms of how we view the world and orient ourselves within it. I take this to be part of what Wittgenstein means when he writes: "...grammar is the shadow of possibility cast by language on phenomena"(PG 329), and that "Grammar tells us what kinds of things things are"(*Philosophical Remarks* p.74, quoted in Finch, 1995:42). As Hacker points out: "A rather obvious fact, but one which has often been disregarded by philosophers, is that by accepting a grammatical rule one commits oneself to a certain form of action, both linguistic and non-linguistic"(1975:166).

Examples of such action include the role of essentialist thought in the maintenance of sexism as highlighted by Carol Gilligan. As she argues: "The failure to see the different reality of women's lives and to hear the differences in their voices stems from the assumption that there is a single mode of social experience and interpretation"(*In A Different Voice*. p.173, quoted in McPhail, 1994:36). While Gilligan might arguably be accused of overstating the deterministic role of language with her Whorfian reference to the "different realities" inhabited by male and female, her focus nevertheless represents a concrete illustration of the social and political implications stemming from Wittgenstein's concern with the dangers produced by the "craving for generality" (1969a:17-18).

Similarly, according to McPhail: "...racism is not merely a black problem, nor a white problem, but a consequence of speaking about and understanding the world in black and white terms...that results from the essentializing consequences of rational thought and language"(1994:i). A set of important social and political consequences thus stem from a rejection of the Tractarian 'picture theory' of language. As McPhail notes: "The conceptualization of language as constructive or generative reverses the referential equation to suggest that the world of differences which we perceive - the products and processes which we know - are created through a language which has for centuries been assumed to be simply a reflection of a world that exists separate and distinct from us"(1994:23).

Ordinary language, I would argue, cannot credibly be considered apolitical or non-ideological with respect to the content of the terms and concepts - the socio-political

lexicon - it furnishes to language users. Such considerations bring Wittgenstein's perspective on ordinary language close to that of Gramsci.

As Gramsci argues:

Common sense is not something rigid and immobile, but is continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas and *with philosophical options which have entered ordinary life*. 'Common sense' is the folklore of philosophy, and is always halfway between folklore properly speaking and the philosophy, science, and economics of the specialists (Gramsci, A. (1971:326), quoted in Wetherell and Potter, (1992:20) emphasis added).

Gramsci's point is important in establishing further the enlargement of the 'bewitchment thesis' in Wittgenstein's writings by helping to illustrate both the non-isolationist nature and the unavoidably ideological dimensions of the sphere of 'ordinary language'. However, it also illustrates the fact that ordinary language is not necessarily conservative since ideas, concepts and language critical of the status quo also invariably find their way in. Thus, as Totman notes: "...the outcome of Marx's theories was a new frame of reference...psychology too has been quite successful in introducing new words into our ordinary talk and putting a new slant on existing words..."(1985:31).

A Wittgensteinian perspective cannot therefore be considered to be committed to 'mere description' in the minimalist and politically inconsequential sense in which the term has traditionally been understood by critics of a Wittgensteinian approach. Rather, a proper understanding of Wittgenstein's apparently conservative and quietistic injunction to look at the way in which words and concepts are used actually entails both a form of comparative socio-political analysis and a form of immanent critique. It is comparative in the sense that what we require to do is to study the use of words and concepts in the context of varied social practices and institutions. This process is, however, also inseparable from the critique of essentialism, since it reveals and underlines the fact that meanings are not fixed and universally applicable, but validated by specific social practices.

A key element of any socio-political critique is the illustration that things as they currently stand are not underpinned by forms of transcendental justification. In this way a Wittgensteinian perspective represents a form of immanent critique because it underlines the fact that it is a set of historically specific and contingent social practices which give words and concepts their role and meaning. As we have already noted, in the words of Wittgenstein, “to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life”(PI §19). From a ‘depth grammar’ perspective this means, however, a ‘form of life’ construed in the full social and political sense of the term. The following quote from Pitkin helps to underline the significance of one of Wittgenstein’s central themes, namely, the contingent nature of our practices, and the importance which an awareness of this has for our social and political life. According to Pitkin: “We might say, where our forms of life are cultural in the sense that they could well be otherwise among human beings—perhaps have been otherwise in other times and cultures—the discovery of our conventions can be achieved by Wittgensteinian analysis...Here freedom begins, as it were, in an awareness of plurality, of alternatives” (1993:338).



**An Exploration of the Theme of Immanent Critique  
in the Later Writings of Wittgenstein**

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In *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse speaks approvingly of the critical features and potential of Karl Kraus's analysis of language. It is, according to Marcuse, one which transcends "the immediate concreteness of the situation...Thus the analysis does not terminate in the universe of ordinary discourse, it goes beyond it and opens a qualitatively different universe, the terms of which may even contradict the ordinary one"(1964:177). It is ironic that Marcuse should choose to contrast this notion of immanent critique with what he regards as the conservative methodological prescriptions and implications of a Wittgensteinian perspective. This becomes clear when we consider the significant and generally acknowledged influence of Kraus's analysis of language on the writings of Wittgenstein (See Baker and Hacker, 1983:235; Sluga, 1996:2-3; Timms, 1989:7-9). According to Glock: "Wittgenstein was influenced by Kraus's masterful polemical analysis of language"(1996:11). As Timms points out: "His work had a decisive influence on...Wittgenstein"(1989:9). Some of the central themes of Kraus's analysis of language are to be found in the writings of Wittgenstein. Thus, in line with Wittgenstein's notion of the 'bewitchment' of our intelligence by language, "What Kraus identifies is a mode of thinking remote from lived experience and rendered opaque by anachronistic...metaphors"(Timms, 1989:152). Kraus's critique of language merely renders more explicit the social and political consequences of Wittgenstein's focus on the 'pictures' it is capable of conveying. As Timms notes, "For Kraus, as for Ruskin, the language of mass communications has turned words into fetishes for which men will fight and die"(1989:157).

MacIntyre's critique of Marcuse is also useful in illustrating how the latter misconceives the nature and potential of a Wittgensteinian perspective. In particular,

it shows that Wittgenstein's ordinary language perspective, properly understood, is itself opposed to the very type of positivism which Marcuse himself claims to be attacking. As MacIntyre points out: "Wittgenstein's interest in ordinary language is an interest in discriminating the genuinely indispensable features of language and therefore of social life from those imposed upon us by distorting theories"(1970:81).

Other key features of a Wittgensteinian perspective undercut Marcuse's conservative interpretation. These include the sustained critique of essentialism with regard to language and concepts; the related notion of 'family resemblance'; and Wittgenstein's stress on the importance of counterfactual reasoning in understanding the role which our language and concepts play within particular contexts. All of these elements in Wittgenstein's later writings underline the socially contingent nature of our language and practices and are thus starkly at odds with Marcuse's characterisation of a Wittgensteinian perspective as 'positivist' (1964:173ff).

### 10.1 *The Notion of an Übersicht*

As already noted, Wittgenstein's later writings have as one of their central themes the significance and desirability of gaining a 'perspicuous view' of our linguistic activities (see Wittgenstein, PI §122; 1980:7; 1981:§273). In this way, argues Wittgenstein, it is possible to dispel the misleading 'pictures' capable of 'holding us captive'(PI§§110-115). In Wittgenstein's view, what an ordinary-language approach does in this way is to effect new insights. This is achieved, however, not via some form of 'externally-validated' critique or epistemological standpoint, but through a therapeutic 'rearrangement' of our existing, but frequently submerged or forgotten, knowledge concerning our linguistic habits and practices i.e., of the way in which words and concepts are, and have been, used. The point is expressed as part of Wittgenstein's critique of the Tractarian search for the deep structure or 'sublime logic' of language. It is not, he argues, as though "we had to hunt out new facts; it is, rather, of the essence of our investigation that we do not seek to learn anything new by it. We want to understand something that is already in plain view. For this is what we seem in some sense not to understand"(PI §89).

However, the idea that we are not somehow gaining new knowledge from a proper understanding of the previously misunderstood workings of our language is potentially misleading. Once again, the particular expression of the point undoubtedly owes a lot to Wittgenstein's desire in the later writings to avoid at all costs the erection of new 'pictures' of how things *must* be which leads to this state of affairs. Nevertheless, as the concept of an *übersicht* illustrates, what we encounter in the apparently conservative methodological injunction of Wittgenstein's that philosophy may only 'describe' is in fact a form of immanent critique. For it is the critical resources provided by the realm of ordinary language properly understood form the basis of the critique of essentialism. This line of thought, however, only makes sense against the background of the richer diachronic conception of an ordinary language perspective argued for above.

### 10.2 *Wittgenstein and Conventionalism*

The theme of 'conventionalism' is an important one in Wittgenstein's writings. It forms part of Wittgenstein's ongoing project to undermine the hold of essentialist 'pictures' of our language and concepts. From our point of view, what is significant is the way in which the notion has sometimes been interpreted. In particular, it is frequently equated by commentators solely with a focus on 'natural facts'. On this view, Wittgenstein's conventionalism is merely the recognition that our concepts would be different if the world or the laws of physics were different etc. This is obviously true, and is part, but only part, of what Wittgenstein intends to convey in using the term.

According to Krebs: "It is because our practices ultimately depend on natural facts, and so are not arbitrary in the sense assumed by the sceptic, that they constitute sufficient justification for our use of language"(quoted in Conway, 1989:114). Krebs's point of course contains an important element of truth. However, in approaching the theme of contingency in Wittgenstein's writings, an overly narrow focus on 'natural facts' results in an apolitical reading of the significance of these writings. For the emergence, maintenance, and role of human linguistic structures and practices, not to mention the meaning given in certain historical epochs and

situations to particular concepts, are not solely contingent on 'natural facts'. A one-sided reading of conventionalism leads to a conception of language in line with the Saussurean view of *langue* - as something which merely 'evolves' in effective isolation from human political and social struggles. In this respect, this reading of conventionalism shares an affinity with the 'dispositional' or 'blind' account of Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following as found, for example, in Nyiri's writings (1976, 1982:58ff). What both tend to leave out is an appreciation of the real social and hence political nature of language. While rules with respect to the understanding of language and concepts are clearly related to the nature of physical reality; they are also followed because of the way society and social relations happen to be structured at various points in history.

A proper understanding of the significance of the notion of 'conventionalism' with regard to language requires that it be more clearly related to historically specific practices and to its role in political processes such as socialization. The reading of conventionalism found in the writings of commentators such as Krebs implicitly erases the distinction between the natural and the political. This in turn affects the reading of the concept of a form of life in Wittgenstein's writings, which tends to be viewed in solely naturalistic terms. Something of this is present in Pitkin's account of conventionalism. According to Pitkin: "...when we talk of the way linguistic conventions limit the possibilities of what can happen in the world, what we will accept as instances of various phenomena, we must also recognise that those conventions are not merely arbitrary; they are part of a conceptual network which works, which functions for us"(1993:136-137). In referring to notions such as conceptual networks which "function for *us*", Pitkin is in danger of underplaying the political dimensions of Wittgenstein's discussion of conventionalism by implicitly limiting the latter to the sphere of the anthropological. However, as Conway argues, from a Wittgensteinian perspective: "It remains open exactly which features...have a...natural basis in terms of a shared uniform form of life, and [those] which call for a predominantly cultural [and ultimately political] account"(1989:82-83).

Our reading of the notion of 'natural facts' itself is an important factor in determining our understanding of the political dimensions of Wittgenstein's writings.

The same sort of difficulty which we encounter with the notion of 'conventionalism' also presents itself when we approach the issue of 'natural facts' and Wittgenstein's concept of 'hinge propositions' - namely, the need to transcend an insufficiently social and political reading. Certain readings of the notion of 'natural facts' tend to obscure the political dimensions of the Wittgensteinian concepts of language-game and form of life. It is, for example, frequently a naturalistic and reified cover for the real human social forces at work in the constitution of our concepts and terms. As a consequence, the notion of conventionalism in Wittgenstein's writings requires to be broadened out from the 'natural conventionalism' of Krebs's analysis, to a fuller more political conception.

There in fact exist two conceptually distinct forms of conventionalism contained within Wittgenstein's account of language. Wittgenstein himself favoured (or indeed only considered) one of these forms of conventionalism, namely, the 'natural'. However, this should not prevent us from exploring fully those other implications of his account which are potentially of a more distinctly political nature. As Wittgenstein wrote: "...let's not forget that a word hasn't got a meaning given to it, as it were, by a power independent of us, so that there could be a kind of scientific investigation into what the word *really* means. A word has the meaning that someone has given to it"(1969a:28). As Chilton and Schäffner point out: "The vocabularies of languages are commonly taken as neutral 'reflections' of the real world. They may be more accurately regarded, however, as constructions of the real that reflect the interests of a speech community"(1997:221).

Certain variants of poststructuralist and postmodernist theory often proceed as if the concept of conventionalism were detachable from that of the social. To say that language and concepts are 'conventional' is not to say that they are all infinitely redefineable or transcendable. As already argued above (pp.46,51,100-101), the conception of language which stresses only the *formal* or *logical* status of its contingency overlooks the constraints imposed by social practices, and historical traditions. As Easton argues: "...instead of examining unlimited possibilities of new forms of social life, we need to look at the kinds of activities that actually exist in

societies and see what opportunities for change are conceivable on the basis of those activities”(1983:81).

### 10.3 *The Critical Role of Counterfactual Reasoning in Wittgenstein's Writings*

The conservative interpretation of a Wittgensteinian perspective is further undercut when we consider the significance of the theme of counterfactual reasoning in Wittgenstein's later writings. Wittgenstein's procedure of imagining alternative language-games plays a critical, demystificatory role in undercutting the philosophical illusions generated by a misunderstanding of the logic of our language, i.e., by a failure to recognize the varied, context-dependent uses to which terms and concepts have been, and can be, put. According to Wittgenstein: “One of the most important methods I use is to imagine a historical development for our ideas different from what actually occurred. If we do this we see the problem from a completely new angle”(Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, p.37e, quoted in Haller, 1988:121). Wittgenstein expresses the same point in *Culture and Value* where he writes: “Nothing is more important for teaching us to understand the concepts we have than constructing fictitious ones”(1980:74e).

An appreciation of the role of this method in Wittgenstein's later writings is thus closely related to a fuller understanding of their political dimensions and significance. In particular, this is evident in the underlining of the historically and socially contingent nature of our language and concepts. The theme of counterfactual reasoning highlights the role played by particular sets of hinge propositions which are at any one time ‘held fast’ within a particular society. Two contrasting interpretations of the above passage from *Culture and Value* are of course possible. Both a conservative and a non-conservative reading are possible depending on how one construes the notion of “*understand[ing]* the concepts we have”. It might, for example, be argued that such understanding merely results in a Burkean respect for language and the concepts which it furnishes as the product of a long process of ‘evolutionary’ development. However, a Wittgensteinian perspective on language is inseparable from a recognition of the contingent, and hence ultimately political, nature of such terms and concepts. The method of counterfactual reasoning is



therefore inseparable from a critique of essentialism and conceptual imperialism. For it locates the meaning and use of words within historically specific contexts of social practices. In this sense both Wittgenstein and Marx can be said to have availed themselves of this method of reasoning. Consider, for example, Marx and the meaning ('use' of) the concept of 'freedom' envisaged under the changed form of life of communism.

In Wittgensteinian terms, the question "What is 'democracy'?" is capable of producing the same 'mental cramp', the same confusion and puzzlement, as the question "What is time?" (see PI §89). What we then do, according to Wittgenstein, is to look and see how the word 'democracy' has actually been used in particular contexts, i.e., within the particular sets of human practices which make up a form of life. What this does in critical terms is to undercut the essentialism which, in true hegemonic style, attempts to erase all other alternative or family resemblance conceptions of the term. A Wittgensteinian perspective reveals the historically specific nature of the currently dominant understanding of the concept, for it shows its specific locus to be the social institutions and practices of the liberal capitalist form of life. In so doing, it undercuts the pretensions to universal relevance. In this sense, the 'craving for generality' identified by Wittgenstein's supposedly conservative later writings is in fact the identification of a fundamental element in the logic of ideology.

As in the case of 'description', it goes without saying that the use made of the knowledge of the historical and irreducibly social nature of language and concepts will be both agent and context-dependent. It is, however, the conservative interpretation of a Wittgensteinian perspective which requires to substantiate the universal claim that the application of a Wittgensteinian perspective will be conservative. This, I submit, is something it cannot credibly do.

#### *10.4 Wittgenstein and Marx*

Benton (1976) has drawn attention to a number of important parallels between the approaches of Wittgenstein and Marx. In particular, as we have seen above, Benton notes the similarity of Marx's distinction between 'phenomenal forms' and real or



‘essential’ relations, and Wittgenstein’s distinction between ‘depth’ and ‘surface’ grammar (1976:5). Such parallels are again significant in undercutting the conservative interpretation of a Wittgensteinian perspective. According to Benton, however, one of the chief *differences* between Wittgenstein and Marx is that “There is, in Wittgenstein, no connection between ‘the bewitchment of the intelligence by means of language’ and the interests of antagonistic social classes, as there is in Marx. Indeed the whole notion of ‘shared’ forms of life, central to Wittgenstein’s conception of language and meaning is quite inconsistent with any conception of class remotely resembling the Marxian one”(1976:6).

On one level Benton’s analysis is certainly correct. It is true that Wittgenstein does not explicitly furnish us with a politically and sociologically replete description of a language-game or form of life. However, as suggested above, we need to distinguish, on the one hand, between those issues which Wittgenstein himself as a conservative personality chooses to make explicit, and the implications stemming from the underlying logic of his insistence on the irreducibly social nature of language. On this basis, it is difficult to insist, as Benton does, that there is no connection whatsoever between Wittgenstein’s focus on the differing ‘uses’ of language within various language-games or a form of life, and the Marxist idea of a stratified class society. At the most basic level, the Wittgensteinian perspective is committed to the view that terms and concepts will differ in their meaning according to the practices of the particular social context within which they are employed. We thus require to look, not merely at language itself, but at the various concrete social practices which form the context in order to understand the uses of language. In this sense we might say part of the ‘grammar’ of the concept of language-as-use is the evocation of pluralism. To focus on the different and context-dependent ways in which words and concepts are used is to fundamentally challenge the idea that there can be one fixed, univocal and essential use. A Wittgensteinian perspective on language is thus inimical to the unidimensionalism of the liberal capitalist concept of ‘freedom’, as well as to the universalist pretensions of notions such as ‘our country’.

For Wittgenstein, like Marx, understanding the meaning and role of words and concepts properly entails a study of the practices, both linguistic and non-linguistic,

of a form of life. Laclau and Mouffe, for example, note Marx's critique of abstractions such as 'production' "which only have meaning in terms of a concrete system of social relations"(1985:99). There are, I would argue, important parallels here with Wittgenstein's location and identification of meaning as the 'use' of terms within a particular form of life, as well as with Wittgenstein's notion of 'bringing words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use'(PI §116). There is a similarity in the conception of how language functions properly or authentically in a non-mystificatory or non-bewitching manner. In this sense, it might plausibly be asserted that implicit within Marx's writings such as the 1857 Introduction is an analysis and critique of what Wittgenstein later termed 'pictures'.

In response to Benton's point, it might also be argued that Marx's account of capitalism is premised on the idea of a 'shared' (albeit coercively imposed) 'form of life', in the sense, firstly, that capitalist production methods and their socio-political superstructure are necessarily global in tendency, and, secondly, that the accompanying bourgeois ideology is something which equally aspires to a universal relevance. (Consider, for example, the *Communist Manifesto* and its depiction of capitalism as a revolutionary and unifying force breaking down the 'Chinese walls' of outmoded economic and social relations.) For Marx, then, there is an important sense in which we all 'share' the capitalist form of life, insofar as we are all affected, though not of course to the same extent or in the same ways, by its workings.

The concept of immanent critique, of course, also features in the writings of Marx. As Easton points out: "Marx in fact shares...the essentially Wittgensteinian view that a standard of criticism must be internal to a mode of production or way of life...Even within a specific mode of production, standards exist by means of which that way of life may be criticised"(1983:127). We can thus note the parallels between Marx's insistence that the criticism of a particular mode of production and the set of social relations which it engenders has to have its critical origins and material basis within the latter in order to avoid becoming merely utopian; and, in the case of Wittgenstein, the argument against the notion of any criticism which is 'external' to any given language-game or form of life on the basis that such criticism would be unintelligible (see e.g., Marx, 1974:47;1975:469;1976:178-9n.2. Wittgenstein, 1969:§82). Without

recourse to the notion of an immanent critique it is difficult, in the case of Marx, to avoid the conclusion that there exists a fundamental (non-Hegelian) contradiction at the heart of much of his writing: between, for example, his repeated critique of 'morality' and talk of 'justice' as the necessarily ideological product of bourgeois society on the one hand; and, on the other, the equally insistent and critical strain which runs throughout his discussion of the capitalist mode of production and the effects of the latter on human beings - an analysis which, at times, is hard to describe as other than a morally founded critique (see e.g., Marx, 1976:799). Similarly, in the case of the later writings of Wittgenstein, the undermining of the Cartesian conception of the mind and the Tractarian conception of language are, as already argued, intelligible products of a form of immanent critique, the critical armoury of which consists of a focus on language and its role in the concrete practices of a form of life.

There have, as Walzer notes, been some traditional philosophical objections to the notion of the 'connected' or 'internal' critic: "Does his connection leave room enough for critical distance? And are standards available to him that are internal to the practices and understandings of his own society, and at the same time properly critical?"(1987:39-40). However, as Walzer also notes:

It is not clear...how much distance critical distance is. Where do we have to stand to be said to be social critics? The conventional view is that we have to stand outside the common circumstances of collective life. Criticism is an external activity; what makes it possible is radical detachment - and this in two senses. First, critics must be emotionally detached, wrenched loose from the intimacy and warmth of membership: disinterested and dispassionate. Second, critics must be intellectually detached, wrenched loose from the parochial understandings of their own society...open-minded and objective. This view of the critic gains strength from the fact that it matches closely the conditions of philosophical discovery and invention and so seems to suggest that only discoverers or inventors, or men and women armed by discoverers and inventors, can be properly objective (1987:36)

Such problems do not assume the same significance if one adopts a Wittgensteinian perspective. The key desideratum of critical distance from the currently dominant

usage and interpretation of concepts is provided by the notion of ordinary language analysis properly understood i.e., as diachronically and not merely synchronically conceived, as well as by the notion of counterfactual reasoning.

Thus, in response to Benton's point above, the fact that, generally speaking, Wittgenstein himself failed to explicitly label particular practices or forms of life 'bourgeois' does not alter the significance of the critical implications which stem from the underlying logic of an irreducibly social conception of language.

#### 10.5 *The "Surface / Depth Grammar"* *Distinction in Wittgenstein*

According to Wittgenstein: "In the use of words one might distinguish 'surface grammar' from 'depth grammar'. What immediately impresses itself upon us about the use of a word is the way it is used in the construction of the sentence, the part of its use -one might say - that can be taken in by the ear. - And now compare the depth grammar, say of the word 'to mean', with what its surface grammar would lead us to suspect. No wonder we find it difficult to know our way about"(PI §664). The importance of the idea of 'depth grammar' for Wittgenstein also serves to further distance his perspective from that of Rorty. Rorty, as we have seen in section I, insists on focusing on 'the sentence'. According to Rorty, "truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent for their existence upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths"(1989:21). Rorty's is, in other words, a 'surface grammar' conception of language, which seriously underplays the fact illustrated by its 'depth grammar' i.e., that it is a phenomenon embedded within human social and political practices. This helps to account for the idealist implications and political prescriptions of Rorty's perspective with, as we have seen, its emphasis on the possibility of an infinite 'redescription' of our social and political situation (see, for example, Rorty, 1989:20).

Benton's account (1976) of the surface/depth grammar distinction in Wittgenstein's writings locates its political and critical relevance. As Benton rightly argues: "Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy as a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by language, together with his distinction between depth and surface-grammar could...plausibly found a conception of 'understanding' in the social

sciences which amounts to exposing ideologies as misrepresentations of social life”(1976:4). However, Benton’s argument also leaves unresolved a number of problematic issues. Firstly, Benton’s argument for an extension of the surface/depth grammar concept to cover not only the description of language in the minimalist sense, but our understanding of the social institutions and practices of a form of life has somehow to be squared with Wittgenstein’s insistence on *description* as opposed to *explanation*. Secondly, Benton’s account fails to address the issue of the evident importance which Wittgenstein attaches to the methodological and operational postulate of ‘openness’ as a key element in the therapeutic and problem-dissolving description of our uses of language. As Wittgenstein insists: “everything lies open to view...what is hidden...is of no interest to us”(PI §126). This dimension of Wittgenstein’s writings presents problems for the ‘depth grammar’ account championed by Benton, and hence the possibility of resurrecting and defending, from within the context of the theoretical resources provided by a Wittgensteinian perspective, the notion of ideology and ‘false consciousness’.

Benton’s underlying intention can, however, be defended and developed via a reconception of certain key notions contained within Wittgenstein’s writings. The apparent tension in Wittgenstein’s writings between ‘explanation’ and ‘description’ can be resolved by looking again at the notion of ‘ordinary language’. As already suggested, a Wittgensteinian perspective properly understood need not equate the latter purely with a synchronic ‘time-slice’ conception of the kind inspired by the Saussurean paradigm of *langue*. Viewing the concept of an ordinary language description diachronically rather than merely synchronically allows us to achieve the required critical ‘depth’ in order to overcome the characterisation of a Wittgensteinian approach as merely descriptive of current established usage and hence necessarily conservative (1966:176,178). The required critical depth is, in other words, provided by historical depth, i.e., via a historical awareness of the various ways in which words and concepts have been used in differing social and political contexts. As Wittgenstein argues: “Being acquainted with many languages prevents us from taking quite seriously a philosophy which is laid down in the forms of any one”(1981:§323). In this way, via an enriched conception of what is entailed

by the 'description' of 'ordinary language', it is possible both to remain faithful to a Wittgensteinian approach and to avoid any sanctification of the current linguistic and conceptual status quo.

But does the argument sketched above actually fit with respect to Wittgenstein's writings? Can there be any principled Wittgensteinian objection to this line of thought? The answer to these questions is, I believe, yes and no respectively, if we consider the extent to which it represents merely an extension or concretization of Wittgenstein's recurrent methodological injunction in favour of counterfactual reasoning as a key resource in countering the problems generated by linguistic and conceptual essentialism (See, for example, PI §130, p.230;1980:74e). In other words, as well as constructing fictitious language-games to break the hold of 'pictures' we can investigate how words and concepts have been used in the past. What are we to say, however, to the possible objection that these past uses of terms and concepts are not applicable to our current form of life? Aren't we in danger here of violating the key Wittgensteinian tenet of 'contextualism'? One response here is to remind ourselves that, for Wittgenstein, the extent and nature of the 'therapy' required in order to dissolve particular instances of 'puzzlement' - i.e., the question of how 'deep' our investigation of our grammar needs to go - depends on the nature of the problem itself (See 1981:273). Since, however, many of the problems of politics and philosophy are generally considered to be of a perennial nature there can be no principled objection to a suitably extended investigation of 'our' uses of language with regard to such issues.

With respect to the second issue outlined above, we still need to address the question of how the Wittgensteinian stress on the 'openness' of language use is to be reconciled with the idea of description as 'depth-grammar'. For, according to Wittgenstein: "Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. - Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain"(PI §126). This apparent difficulty can be overcome if we note again the significance which Wittgenstein attaches to the notion of an overview (*übersicht*). As we have already seen, it is Wittgenstein's contention that: "...we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words. - Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity"(PI



§122). Just as Wittgenstein had earlier argued in the *Tractatus* that language was ‘in order as it is’ (1974:56) while simultaneously acknowledging the need for a form of depth analysis to reveal the atomic propositions and the ‘objects’ which underpin it; so in the later writings also language use lies ‘open to view’ or is ‘on the surface’ but only when we attain a proper overview of its workings. For, as Wittgenstein also points out: “The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something - because it is always before one’s eyes.)”(PI §129).

The argument here is that a Wittgensteinian ‘depth grammar’ perspective highlights the historical, social and political dimensions of human language use. In a sense then, Wittgenstein’s insistence that ‘everything lies open to view’ is at one level correct; but only, I would argue, on the adoption of some variant of ‘historical semantics’ as found, for example, in the writings of Richter (1995), Skinner (1976, 1988) and Williams (1988). The fact that the grammar of our language is not instantly or synchronically surveyable runs counter to the notions of ‘ordinary language’ and ‘description’ relied on by critics such as Marcuse. Contrary to Marcuse’s view, the authentic description of political terms and concepts entails a survey or *übersicht* capable of revealing the historically varying uses of language. In this sense a Wittgensteinian perspective properly understood cannot be said to sanctify the conceptual status quo.



### An Exploration of the Socio-Political Significance of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*

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The intention of this chapter is to illustrate the political significance of the issues raised by Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*, and to demonstrate how their treatment underlines again the non-conservative dimensions of a Wittgensteinian perspective. The issues raised by Wittgenstein's ostensibly abstract and purely epistemological concerns in fact highlight topics such as political socialization and the role of language in ideology. Wittgenstein's writings in *On Certainty* provide what might be termed a 'post-foundational' treatment of such topics i.e., one which recognises the implications of the linguistic turn, but without sanctioning any lapse into linguistic idealism. The themes and issues raised in this chapter are developed further and critically applied in the section IV case study relating to the role of language in the political project of Thatcherism.

#### 11.1 *Political Socialization*

At first glance, the specifically political import of Wittgenstein's remarks in *On Certainty* is not, perhaps, immediately obvious. On one level this is unsurprising, since Wittgenstein is primarily concerned with a series of epistemological considerations designed to illustrate the contradictory and wrong-headed nature of both radical forms of scepticism, and Moore's attempted defence of our common-sense beliefs. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein's remarks provide a model for understanding the role of language in the process of political socialization. This comes through, for example, in Wittgenstein's insistence that: "I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false"(1969:§94). It is also evident in the following

passage where Wittgenstein suggests: "The propositions describing [our] world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules"(1969:§95).

The social and political significance of language is clearly illustrated by its role in the process of political socialization. According to Rush and Althoff: "Political socialisation is the process by which an individual becomes acquainted with the political system and which determines his perceptions of politics and his reactions to political phenomena...From a political point of view, political socialization is extremely important as the process by which individuals may become involved, to varying degrees, in political participation"(1971:13-14). In a similar vein, according to Verba:

...it is quite important to discover what political beliefs are - to borrow a term from Milton Rokeach - primitive beliefs. Primitive political beliefs are those so implicit and generally taken for granted that each individual holds them and believes all other individuals hold them. They are the fundamental and usually unstated assumptions or postulates about politics (1970:211).

There are some clear parallels here between Verba's analysis of 'primitive political beliefs' and Wittgenstein's discussion of 'hinge propositions' in *On Certainty* (1969:§§341,343,655). Wetherell and Potter (1992:177ff) have also examined what they term "Some commonplaces of political discourse", examples of which they have extracted from Hansard, and which concern the politics of New Zealand. Again, these might plausibly be viewed as representing some concrete examples of the operation of hinge propositions in the sphere of the political. As Wetherell and Potter point out with respect to the nature of such propositions: "Each is normally presented in argument as 'rhetorically self-sufficient'. That is, as a clinching argument, or as a principle which should be beyond question"(1992:177). Similarly, Conway notes the way in which: "The linguistic practices of our community become the conditions through which we see the world"(1989:82).

One of the key aspects of such propositions then is the fact that they are, in general, implicit and unquestioned. Indeed, the architectonic function which they fulfil within the sphere of ideology renders this an imperative. The number of references within

the literature to the notion of 'common-sense' assumptions, or 'givens' which operate in regard to political behaviour is significant in terms of underlining further the relevance of a Wittgensteinian perspective. However, in contrast to the logic of Wittgenstein's perspective, analyses such as Verba's are frequently ahistorical insofar as they underplay the link between practices and the continued functioning of hinge propositions. Thus according to Verba: "...they are unchallengeable since no opportunity exists to call them into question...the political beliefs of the ordinary man are not structured according to the logic of comparative political analysis. The fact that the universality of the belief would be called into question if he considered political systems other than his own may offer no challenge to the depth of his belief in them"(1970:211, n.5).

The logic of Verba's analysis has, however, been consistently and concretely refuted by the effects of those images and sounds beamed across the Berlin wall, and by the moves on the part of certain Islamic states to outlaw the use of satellite broadcasting in order to shield their population from what they regard as the corrupting and socially destabilising influence of Western values.

While it remains the case that in order for any particular hinge proposition to be brought into question or criticised others require, in Wittgenstein's terminology, to be 'held fast'; nevertheless, the equally crucial point which frequently goes unrecognised is that such propositions *need not* always go unquestioned or remain implicit. Thus while there are implicit analogues of the Wittgensteinian concept of hinge propositions to be found in various political writings, a Wittgensteinian perspective more effectively highlights the significance of the role played by language and practices in the creation and maintenance of such hinge propositions. In so doing it highlights their social, and hence ultimately political, basis. The link between concrete social practices and the maintenance of such hinge propositions is therefore a crucial one. As Eccleshall points out:

A ruling-class ideology, unlike its competitors, *vindicates the actual distribution of power and wealth; it discovers the social ideal in present arrangements...* People who are daily accustomed to social inequalities may be disposed to believe that the present power structure is natural and unchangeable. An ideology such as Bennite socialism,...may seem to

them...perverse and fanciful. An ideology such as free-market conservatism...may appear, conversely, as sensible and realistic. Hence...a ruling-class ideology may enjoy an intrinsic advantage over its rivals. Its beliefs may be so deeply ingrained in existing society that they are synonymous, as Gramsci argued...with 'common sense'(1984:29, emphasis added).

Nevertheless, Thatcherism, as will be argued in section IV of the study, failed in part because of the resistant nature of certain hinge-propositions which the former, as a hegemonic strategy, was unable to deconstruct and rearticulate. Why was this the case? One set of considerations points to the fact that within a given form of life there are also invariably practices, for example, of a collectivist or intrinsically social nature, which conflict with right-wing strategies of hegemony. The concept of a form of life, in other words, need not necessarily be construed in an entirely homogenous way as a 'shared' form of life; although this is the impression usually conveyed by Wittgenstein's own particular formulation. (This, though, is qualified by the pluralism of Wittgenstein's statement: "What has to be accepted, the given, is - so one could say - *forms* of life"(PI 226, emphasis added)). Eccleshall's otherwise valuable perspective thus overlooks the political significance of those discourses and ideas of a critical nature which have become a sedimented part or strata of 'ordinary language'.

One of the things Wittgenstein's concept of hinge propositions enables is a more sophisticated conception of the role of language in socialization. This becomes clear if we note the distinction Greenstein draws between 'narrow' and 'broad' definitions of political socialization. According to Greenstein, a narrow definition entails "...the deliberate inculcation of political information, values and practices by instructional agents who have been formally charged with this responsibility", while a broad conception includes " ...all political learning, formal and informal, deliberate and unplanned, at every stage of the life cycle, including not only explicitly political learning but also nominally non-political learning of relevant personality characteristics"(Greenstein,1968:551, quoted in Rush and Althoff, 1971:21). Greenstein's broad conception of political socialization thus ties in with Wittgenstein's emphasis on the role of hinge propositions. The political significance

of *On Certainty* and the concept of hinge propositions also emerges in Conway's discussion of Wittgenstein. As Conway suggests: "In social contexts, particular interpretations become so widely accepted that they become taken for granted as factual accounts of how things actually are. No culture considers itself involved in interpretation; each thinks it is engaged in factual portrayals of things in their objective actuality. People are trained in such widely accepted interpretations" (1989:81).

On the one hand, Wittgenstein's perspective avoids a narrow conspiratorial conception of ideology and political socialization. At the same time, by anchoring the process in the wider setting of a form of life with its focus on social practices, it avoids the postmodern tendency towards linguistic idealism which equates the functioning of ideology with language *per se*. Wittgenstein's account thus preserves the role of language in the process but by setting this within a context of social practices avoids the dangers of linguistic reductionism.

### 11.2 Wittgenstein and the Logical Prerequisites of Critique

Wittgenstein's account in *On Certainty* is concerned with the underlying logical conditions of existence of any sceptical or critical language-game. Contrary to the conservative interpretation of a Wittgensteinian perspective it is not therefore committed to preserving particular hinge propositions. As already noted, in Wittgenstein's view: "An education quite different from ours might also be the foundation for quite different concepts" (1981:387). Moreover, if we transpose the essence of Wittgenstein's argument from the abstract level of logic to that of the socio-political, it is immediately evident that this is a line of thought which, far from being inherently conservative, is entirely in line with the outlook of such radical thinkers as Marx. Indeed, it is a point the logic of which is acknowledged by all but the most thoroughly utopian and nihilistic of social critics. For what Wittgenstein's account highlights is that hinge propositions function as the logical prerequisites for the very possibility of such critical language-games as the raising of doubt concerning particular human beliefs and practices.

The implications of *On Certainty* thus also highlight the inadequacies associated with the global epistemological critique enunciated in the name of poststructuralism or postmodernism. Foucault's allegedly presuppositionless critique of power, for example, becomes problematic given Wittgenstein's demonstration of the necessity of some things being granted temporary immunity from such critiques. As Wittgenstein points out: "[T]he questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn. That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are in deed not doubted"(1969:§§341,342).

In line, interestingly, with critical theorists from Marx to the Frankfurt School, Wittgenstein differs from Foucault in his recognition of the necessity of some contingent, but nevertheless presently unquestioned and uncriticised presuppositions, which are able to function as critical fulcrums in the argument for change. Such a perspective stands in contrast to that of Foucault, who asserts that we must: "Reject all theory and all forms of general discourse...This need for theory is still part of the system we reject"(Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, p.231, quoted in Palmer, 1990:27).

Wittgenstein's writings in *On Certainty* also underline another important element missing from the conception of language advanced by Rorty and Lyotard, namely, an adequate appreciation of the social and historical constraints associated with the context in which language operates. The absence of any analogue of the concept of hinge propositions means that theorists such as Rorty, Lyotard, Laclau, Mouffe and Hall frequently underestimate the resistance of currently dominant forms of discourse to strategies of deconstruction or hegemony. As a result of a holistic perspective stressing the socially embedded nature of language and its interaction with the concrete practices of a form of life, Wittgenstein's perspective is less susceptible to the dangers of linguistic idealism.

The writings of *On Certainty* also highlight the existence of a non-conservative concept of change in Wittgenstein's writings. It is a non-conservative concept of change because it indicates only that *some* things have to stand fast, it says nothing about their nature or content. It is also a non-conservative concept of change because



it recognises that a range of hinge propositions are the product of contingent human social practices, and thus not fixed for all time. In line with Marx, Wittgenstein's perspective recognises that a change in the practices and institutions of a society will result in a different set of hinge propositions being held fast.

Contrary to the conservative interpretation of a Wittgensteinian perspective, criticism and change with regard to particular language-games or form of life are possible. However, such activities presuppose a reliance on an alternative conception of a form of life. In other words, in order to advocate the continuance of, or to criticise the existence of, a particular language-game or form of life, certain other things or propositions must, as Wittgenstein puts it, be 'held fast'. What Wittgenstein's argument in fact highlights is the logic underlying the approaches of both conservative and radical alike. As Lugg points out: "Where radicals and conservatives differ is with regard to what they accept and what they choose to put into question, not with regard to whether they start from scratch and submit everything they believe in to scrutiny"(1985:469).

*On Certainty* thus implicitly questions the basis of the differentiation continually made and operated on between the contingent and the truly foundational. Wittgenstein's perspective raises the issue of which particular propositions are, at any given time being 'held fast' and thus protected from recognition and criticism through being classified as 'self-evident' propositions denoting 'essential' human traits such as the innate capacity to 'truck and barter'. It also raises the equally important and related issue of distinguishing in whose interests such hinge-propositions might be said to be objectively operating.

### 11.3 *The Logic and Politics of Change: Wittgenstein, Popper and Marx*

As we have seen, Wittgenstein's remarks in *On Certainty* illustrate the interlocking nature of our language, concepts and practices. Wittgenstein's holistic perspective is also relevant to the issue of conservatism in another way. The notion of hinge propositions, for example, might suggest that questions and criticisms of a fundamental nature are likely to be effectively ruled out of consideration due to their potentially threatening ramifications. In this respect there are some possible parallels



with Kuhn's account of the nature of the issues and questions open for consideration during those periods of 'normal science' which take place within the overarching framework of particular paradigms. (As a possible further illustration of the parallels between Wittgenstein and Kuhn see *On Certainty* §92, where Wittgenstein refers to the notion of a 'conversion' of individuals from one point of view to another). On a political level, Wittgenstein's account, it might then be argued, merely represents an implicit justification of the assumptions underlying Popper's insistence on the need for a gradualist perspective on change in the sphere of the social and political (1980a, 1980b). On this view, only reformist conclusions and policies would seem to be supported by the epistemology of Wittgenstein's anti-sceptical argument in *On Certainty* which, as we have seen, requires that certain things 'stand fast'.

The essence of Popper's argument is that large-scale or 'utopian' projects of societal change are impossible, since their very scale prevents the disentanglement of cause and effect which is necessary for the choice, guidance, and evaluation of any such project. Furthermore, such large-scale change, argues Popper, necessarily entails a corresponding political system of a totalitarian nature. From our point of view, what is important is Popper's characterisation of 'utopian holism' as the "...attempt to deal with society *as a whole, leaving no stone unturned*", and as "the apocalyptic revolution which will radically transfigure *the whole social world*" (1980a:164, emphasis added). This conception of what is entailed in the notion of fundamental change is equally apparent in the writings of Popper's defenders (see, for example, Lessnoff, 1980:112-113).

Popper, of course, wishes to attribute this conception of holism to Marx. However, as Freeman argues, Marx's view more closely approximates to a "weak sense" of holism (1975:24). This is evident in Marx's stress on the need to change, not "the whole social world", as Popper asserts, but those important "structural features deemed to be of critical importance for the distribution of power and life-chances in society" (ibid). Also significant, as Freeman notes, is the fact that Popper fails to provide any textual evidence for the imputed conception of holism in Marx's writings (ibid). In addition, the conception which Popper would like to attribute to Marx takes no account of Marx's philosophical indebtedness to Hegel (a fact which Popper, of

course, finds significant when wishing to draw certain other conclusions). Yet the notion of organic societal development found in the writings of Hegel is also found, among other places, in Marx's stress on the long transition from a class to a fully communist society. This refutes the notion that Marx was a holist in the strong sense of the term i.e., as one who conceived the possibility, in Popper's words, of "radically transfigur[ing] *the whole social world*". On the contrary, Marx, like Wittgenstein, was keenly aware of the extent to which each new form of society depended on that preceding it, and hence of the limitations imposed on the scale and speed of social change. In this respect even revolutionary perspectives such as Marxism acknowledge the need for certain things to 'stand fast'. Where they differ from Popperian gradualism is in their refusal to identify the latter with those currently held fast. The logic of a Wittgensteinian perspective as outlined in writings such as *On Certainty* is thus not incompatible with such revolutionary projects.

## Section IV

### Political Consequences of the Linguistic Turn

## Chapter 12

### **Theoretical Sources of Hall's Reading of Thatcherism: (1)The Writings of Laclau and Mouffe**

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#### *12.1 The Linguistic Turn and the Supplementation of the Marxist Category of Ideology*

In the writings of Laclau and Mouffe, a key contention is the idea that discourses are never 'closed'. Discourses, in other words, never exhaust the available meanings and identities in society (1995:120). For Laclau and Mouffe, discourses are historically contingent and politically constructed (1985:121). It is argued that the scope for action on the part of subjects is "made possible by the precariousness of those discourses with which they identify"(quoted in Howarth, 1995:123). Subjects act in different ways when the contingency of their identities is revealed (quoted in Howarth, 1995:123). As in the writings of Rorty and Hall, a great deal of importance is attached by Laclau and Mouffe to the concept of 'articulation'. According to Laclau and Mouffe: "This concept refers to a practice of bringing together different elements and combining them in a new identity"(1985:119). In this sense it is closely related to Rorty's notion of 'redescription'. According to Laclau and Mouffe, the concept of 'articulation' represents a radicalization of Althusser, an 'explosion' of Althusser's basic notions with respect to language and ideology (1985:97). In common with Hall, Laclau and Mouffe also insist that, for Gramsci, "the ideological elements articulated by a hegemonic class do not have a necessary class belonging"(quoted in Barrett, 1991:63). In their strategy of 'exploding' and 'radicalising' Althusser's theory Laclau and Mouffe speak of "affirming the precarious and relational character of every identity"(1985:99).

As Barrett notes: “The substantive arguments of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* pivot on Laclau and Mouffe’s reading of Gramsci”(1991:63). According to Barrett, Laclau and Mouffe regard Gramsci as “the furthest point that can be reached within Marxism”(1991:63). However, as Barrett also suggests, from the point of view of Laclau and Mouffe, Gramsci’s perspective remains an ‘essentialist’ one (1991:63). As Laclau and Mouffe themselves recognise, “everything depends on how ideology is conceived”(1985:67). According to Laclau and Mouffe: “Just as the era of normative epistemologies has come to an end, so too has the era of universal discourses”(Quoted in Barrett, 1991:62). For Laclau and Mouffe, as for Lyotard, theories such as Marxism are not viable on general grounds. In this respect, Laclau and Mouffe’s arguments represent central themes of poststructuralist and postmodernist thought. From a Wittgensteinian perspective it is possible to criticise the sweeping generality underlying the claims of Laclau and Mouffe. The latter represents another instance of what Wittgenstein termed the ‘craving for generality’, not to mention the very sort of ‘meta-narrativity’ which Laclau and Mouffe wish to deny to Marxism and other allegedly ‘totalising’ approaches.

### 12.2 Laclau and Mouffe on ‘Discourse’

Laclau and Mouffe explicitly equate their conception of discourse with Wittgenstein’s notion of a language-game (1985:108). They also wish to acknowledge, however, that “Language games, in Wittgenstein, include within an indissoluble totality both language and the actions interconnected with it” (1985:108). The question to be explored in more detail throughout section IV of this study is whether Laclau and Mouffe are actually able to follow through the logic of this type of recognition in their analysis and still maintain the distance they want to from the ‘economism’ of ‘Marxism’.

Laclau and Mouffe set out to obviate what they regard as the more common misunderstandings of the concept of ‘discourse’(1985:108-114). According to Laclau and Mouffe: “The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition...What is denied is not that such objects exist externally

to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence”(1985:108).

The use of the term ‘constituted’ is, however, a key part of the problem here. One has to ask why Laclau and Mouffe do not simply say that all objects are linguistically mediated i.e., that by necessity we have to use language in order to speak of or think about such things as objects and social institutions or processes. The term ‘constitute’, by contrast, implies the ontological creation of these objects by language, even though this is something which Laclau and Mouffe apparently deny. The way in which events and things are labelled is obviously important, but is this all that Laclau and Mouffe mean to say, or can say without lapsing into the idealism which they are at such pains to deny?

Suspensions are raised further by Laclau and Mouffe’s statement that: “Our analysis rejects the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices ...any distinction between what are usually called the linguistic and behavioural aspects of a social practice, is either an incorrect distinction or ought to find its place as a differentiation within the social production of meaning, which is structured under the form of discursive totalities”(1985:107). Laclau and Mouffe criticise Foucault for maintaining just such a distinction (1985:107. See also Laclau and Mouffe, 1985:145n14). In criticising Foucault’s notion of non-discursive complexes, Laclau and Mouffe argue that when these are analysed “we will only find more or less complex forms of differential positions ...which can only...be conceived as discursive articulations”(1985:107).

According to Mouffe: “To be able to think about the politics of radical democracy through the notion of tradition, it is important to emphasise the composite, heterogeneous, open, and ultimately indeterminate character of the democratic tradition”(1993:17). There is, however, an insufficiently Wittgensteinian recognition of the role of practices and hinge propositions as elements of interpretational and other constraint. It is this which is needed in order to balance the Saussurean / Derridean tendencies of Mouffe’s account. As Ball points out: “Conceptual contestation remains a permanent possibility even though it is in practice actualised only intermittently”(quoted in Birch,1993:9). The reason “it is actualised only

intermittently” stems from the role of hinge propositions and practices in the socio-political sphere.

There is a big difference between Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of discourse and what Fairclough refers to as ‘critical discourse analysis’(1995). What is frequently missing in the account of Laclau and Mouffe is Fairclough’s recognition that “Power is conceptualised both in terms of asymmetries between participants in discourse events, and in terms of unequal capacity to control how texts are produced, distributed and consumed...in particular sociocultural contexts”(1995:1). As Fairclough writes: “In using the term ‘discourse’, I am proposing to regard language use as a form of social practice, rather than a purely individual activity...”(1993:63). Fairclough’s formulation is thus close to the concept of linguistic pragmatics noted above by way of a criticism of the conception of language found in the writings of Rorty and Lyotard (pp.55-58;73-74). This perspective, acknowledges Fairclough, is also implicit in the approach of linguistic philosophy “though often [expressed] in individualistic terms”(1995:63). An important implication of this conception of discourse is that “it implies that there is a dialectical relationship between discourse and social structure: the latter is both a condition for, and an effect of, the former”(1995:63-64). As in the writings of Wittgenstein, critical discourse analysis “foregrounds links between social practice and language”( Fairclough, 1995:96).

### *12.3 Wittgenstein Contra Laclau and Mouffe*

In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein puts forward an argument concerning the explanatory or philosophical inadequacy of any reference to ostensive definition alone in accounting for the conveyance of meaning. It is possible, I would argue, to apply the underlying logic of Wittgenstein’s line of thought here to a critique of Laclau, Mouffe and Hall, in particular, to the key notion of the hegemonic strategy of the disarticulation/rearticulation of key socio-political concepts or ‘signifiers’ found within their writings. Just as ostensive definition is insufficient to fix meaning without language also being embedded in the matrix of concrete human practices, likewise any hegemonic strategy conducted at any particular point solely or largely at the level of the linguistic or conceptual will be insufficient to ‘capture’ or



‘disarticulate’ the signifier or concept concerned. As we shall see in more detail in chapter 16, this is borne out by the failings of the Thatcherite project as reflected in the survey data.

From a Wittgensteinian perspective the concept of ‘articulation’ employed by Laclau and Mouffe is something whose political significance is constrained by form of life considerations, i.e., by the fact that language is embedded within a network of concrete social practices. Any attempted articulations, in order to be more than marginally successful, must operate at the level of a form of life, i.e. they must include non-linguistically reducible concrete practices. The Gramscian notion of the ideological entrenchment of bourgeois ideas - a process which as Gramsci argued made necessary the long drawn-out ‘war of position’ - is also of significance in critically assessing Laclau, Mouffe and Hall’s analyses of Thatcherism. The Gramscian conception of language suggests that it is not only bourgeois ideas which become entrenched (through recurring sets of social practices) but also the sorts of ideas - many of which are essentially bourgeois or liberal in origin, such as ‘equality’, ‘democracy’ etc., - which Thatcherism in its project of ideological hegemony attempted, but failed, to dislodge.

#### 12.4 *Mouffe, Gramsci and Ideological Hegemony*

Mouffe wishes to employ Gramsci’s concept of hegemony in order to combat the alleged economism of Marxism. According to Mouffe, “Gramsci emerges as the first Marxist to have established a non-reductionist problematic of ideology” (1981:172). For Gramsci, hegemony is defined as “political, intellectual and moral leadership”(1981:172). According to Mouffe, this concept of hegemony “implies a new problematic of the role of ideology in a social formation and of the nature of the ideological struggle which provides the basis for the ‘enlarged’ conception of politics that we need today”(1981:167). However, this “‘enlarged’ conception of politics” is precisely what a Wittgensteinian perspective provides, but without the linguistic or conceptual reductionism which underlies the writings of Laclau and Mouffe.

As Mouffe argues: “What is new in the Gramscian conception of hegemony is the important role which is ascribed to ideology - understood as a practice producing

subjects - in the process of transformation of a society. For Gramsci, it is always on the terrain of a determinate conception of the world that men and women 'acquire consciousness of themselves and their tasks' and any possibility for the transformation of a society must necessarily include the transformation of this conception of the world"(1981:172).

Worth noting here is the implied causal chain: only if language is first changed can there be any changed circumstances. Laclau and Mouffe's conception of the language thought relation runs up against Wittgenstein's critique of the model of an 'inner mental picture' which allegedly accompanies and guides action. Most importantly, their conception is one ignores the key Wittgensteinian emphasis on practices.

The linguistic idealism of Mouffe is also evident in passages such as the following in which it is argued "...there are no class ideologies which exist prior to their inscription in discursive practices, but it is these practices themselves which...play a major role in the reproduction of certain types of relations of production"(1981:184). Again, according to Mouffe: "It is in ideology, that the definition of reality is created which extends from philosophy to common sense, and at all levels of culture defines what is just and what is unjust, what is possible and what is impossible, and it is these 'world limits' that it is important to transform in order to create another form of 'subjectivity'"(1981:184).

In common with Hall, Mouffe insists throughout that ideological hegemony must be attained *prior* to the seizure of political and economic power. What we have, however, is an undialectical conception of the language/practice relationship which leads to linguistic idealism i.e., the implicit thesis that a change in discursive practices is sufficient to bring about a change in material conditions. There is the continual stress by Mouffe on the notion of 'articulation' as the important element in political struggle. According to Laclau and Mouffe: "'Serf', 'slave', and so on, do not designate in themselves antagonistic positions; it is only in the terms of a different discursive formation, such as 'the rights inherent to every human being', that the differential positivity of these categories can be subverted and the subordination constructed as oppression" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985:153-4, quoted in Smith, A.M.,1994:29). Once again there are clear Saussurean overtones of a self-enclosed

system of purely linguistic signifiers, of a synchronic, apolitical conception of language. This is clear in the emphasis laid on the constitutive significance of language and in the consequent downplaying of concrete practice of a social and political nature.

The idea common to the writings of Laclau, Mouffe and Hall that discursive ideological hegemony must first be achieved before all else fits in with the overall emphasis on the significance of the ideological sphere in the rise of Thatcherism. Precisely because of this, and the tendency to overestimate the political significance and efficacy of language which it entails, the position is one which a Wittgensteinian perspective on the issue would contest.

Laclau and Mouffe, as we have seen, frequently level the charge of economic or class reductionism at classical Marxism and at recent theorists such as Althusser. A good deal of work is thus done in the writings of Laclau, Mouffe and Hall by the idea that Gramscian hegemony is fundamentally opposed to that found in classical Marxism. However, the lack of any detailed references to the works of the 'classical Marxist tradition' leads one to suspect that the latter functions more as a convenient straw man (See Laclau and Mouffe, 1985:76-8). Equally important to note is the degree to which the straw man of Marxism erected by Laclau and Mouffe is dependent on secondary interpretations. As E.M. Wood points out, Laclau and Mouffe are quoting here from the interpretation of Marx as a technological determinist put forward by G.A. Cohen. As Wood notes: "This practice of interpretation by proxy is followed consistently throughout their account of Marx" (1986:55.n15).

### 12.5 The 'Picture' of Marxism as 'Deterministic'

The basis of the stereotype or 'picture' is the still commonly asserted view that Marx was an economic or historical determinist (see e.g. Blanshard, 1966; Perez-Diaz, 1978:70). A number of comments made by Marx have been highlighted by proponents of the determinist thesis. For example, in *Capital* Vol.1, Marx speaks of "the natural *laws* of capitalist production...working with *iron necessity* towards inevitable results"(1977:416). Elsewhere Marx speaks of human consciousness being

“determined” by social existence (*A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, MECW 29:263). There is no doubt that such statements have been influential in the development of the notion that Marx was a rigid determinist. However, some general remarks regarding such statements by Marx are required. While it is possible - through injudiciously selective quotation - to textually support a determinist reading of Marx this, I would argue, is accomplished only at the cost of systematically discounting the crucial context of Marx’s statements. In line with his Eleventh *Thesis on Feuerbach* Marx himself not only *interpreted* the world but actively sought - through his writings - to *change* it. As a consequence we often find in Marx’s writings a tension between the philosophical and the polemical, since at various stages in his life he has particular axes of this or that nature to grind. Consequently, we often find emphasis being placed on particular aspects of historical materialism at different times depending on Marx’s philosophical or political opponent. In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, for example, Marx - in a polemic against Proudhon’s multidetermined analysis of societal change - argues for the explanatory primacy of material production (see MECW 6:166).

We might also note that in Marx’s historical writings such as the *Class Struggle in France*, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, *The Civil War in France*, there is not a hint of a determinist, or fatalistic approach to historical change. Rather, the role of the individual receives special emphasis in these writings, as writers such as Sartre have acknowledged (1963:14,25-27). In addition to these writings, support for a non-deterministic interpretation of historical materialism can be drawn from works such as *The Poverty of Philosophy*, *The Communist Manifesto* and elsewhere. However, any textual support for a non-determinist reading requires to be grounded within broader considerations of methodological consistency within Marx’s writings. The determinist thesis requires to be evaluated in terms of its plausibility as an interpretation of Marx’s work as a whole i.e., in terms of how well it fits in with Marx’s overall philosophical and political perspective.

At the heart of the determinist reading of historical materialism is the idea that humans are somehow denied real historical agency by economic, technological, or other forces outwith their control. A useful framework for discussion of the issue is

provided by the theoretical base/superstructure dichotomy (keeping in mind, of course, that the question of a 'dichotomy' or otherwise is precisely what is at issue). The debate revolves around the question of whether, and to what extent, the 'base' (i.e. the material, economic, and technological elements) 'determines' the 'superstructure' (i.e. the ideological, and political elements) and whether the latter is capable of reacting on the former (see *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, MECW 29:263).

We should note, however, that Marx does not isolate the forces of production from the relations of production as the technological determinist thesis does (see e.g. Cohen, 1979:28-31). As Brenkert points out, in Marx's writings the conception of the productive forces is not limited to technological forces but includes such distinctly human elements as the revolutionary class, the community and so on (1983:31). Within Marx's formulation there is, in other words, no rigid conceptual demarcation between the technological/economic elements and those elements of the superstructure such as language and ideology. Yet it is a central characteristic of the determinist thesis that it focuses on the forces of production and construes the latter in an analytically one-sided and narrow fashion as a non-human, technological phenomenon. In contrast, Marx views the mode of production as *a conceptual whole* which includes the forces *and* relations of production, and it is the *mode of production* which Marx accords explanatory primacy to rather than one element within it. Recognition of this undercuts the determinist thesis by illustrating the essential role played by the conscious human element (in the form of the relations of production) which - *together with* technological advances etc. - produce new social formations in history.

This methodological approach is to be expected since it is entirely consistent with Marx's overall philosophical perspective. In contrast to that underlying the determinist thesis (witness e.g. the latter's unidirectional conception of influence from base to superstructure) Marx's approach is dialectical as he makes clear at various points in his writings (see e.g. MECW 5:53-54, 81-82). Accordingly it is implausible that Marx would attribute explanatory primacy to the forces of production as these are characterised by theorists such as Cohen. On the latter view,

they are construed narrowly and in conceptual isolation from the relations of production. This, however, means the forces of production contain no contradictions capable of powering development and hence social change. Yet Marx's dialectical method of explanation depends on the notion of contradiction in accounting for historical development.

Cohen's interpretation of historical materialism can be seen as a reaction to the Althusserian account, in particular to the latter's concept of 'overdetermination' as an explanation of base/superstructure relations. However, in Cohen's account the interpretational pendulum swings to the other extreme thereby achieving, in essence, a restatement of such schematically mechanical interpretations of historical materialism as Plekhanov and Kautsky (see G. Plekhanov, *The Role of the Individual in History*, and K. Kautsky, *The Economic Doctrines of Karl Marx*). Rather ironically then, it might be argued that Cohen's 'defence' of Marx's theory of history actually succeeds in bolstering the determinist reading of the latter which constitutes the core of the determinist stereotype. However, as Mills argues, Cohen's narrow conceptualization both fails to find adequate support from a balanced reading of Marx's writings and - in its unidirectional bias - is also at odds with the historical record and the evidence of stagnation and regression in human history (1988:339).

The determinist reading also conflicts with Marx's account of the role of the dominant class at any particular point in history. Marx's account presupposes that the superstructure must be capable of reacting on the base since the ruling class seeks - through political, judicial, religious and other superstructural means - to secure its own position. The very function of these superstructural 'non-economic' (insofar as they are analytically construed in the technological determinist account) institutions means that they can have an enormous economic impact. 'Property rights', for example, are, in a strictly analytical sense juridical, and therefore part of the superstructure; yet they play an essential role in regulating the way in which exploitation takes place within the economic base (see MECW 5:89-93). As already suggested, this conception of reciprocal interaction is demanded by Marx's overall dialectical methodology.

Far from ignoring the impact of the superstructural elements on the base (narrowly



construed as the economic or technological) as the determinist thesis asserts, Marx's whole account of human history is, on the contrary, built around it. For instance, why - on the determinist reading of Marx - should the relations of production be capable of acting as 'fetters' which impede the development of new productive forces as Marx insists that they do? (see Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, MECW 29:263). It is only when the base/superstructure relationship is conceived dialectically that the latter notion becomes intelligible. Thus any new forms of production which threaten the monopoly of wealth and power enjoyed by the ruling class can be countered through conscious, human, superstructural activity; e.g. through the passing of laws which declare said new forms of production illegal; and from within the spheres of religion and morality through a corresponding ethical or religious condemnation of the latter. Marx, therefore, clearly acknowledges the power of the superstructure. As he writes: "... it can be truly asserted that *all* human relations and functions, however and wherever they manifest themselves, influence material production and have a more or less determining effect upon it" (*Theories of Surplus Value*, Part 1, cited in Mills, 1988:329). Contrary to the determinist thesis, we are not dealing, in Marx's historical materialism, with a theoretical construct positing unidirectional influence from the base upwards. Such a conception is entirely at odds both with Marx's actual writings and with his general philosophical and methodological approach which is dialectical.

Much of the apparent argumentative force of the determinist thesis derives from a misconception of the nature of the distinction which Marx is drawing between the base and superstructure. As other commentators have noted, the distinction is to be understood conceptually i.e., as the result of Marx's attempt to explain in language (and therefore necessarily by abstraction) a complex social phenomenon which exists in reality only as a whole (see Brenkert, 1983:29; and Hoffman, 1975:114). Since in a sense all understanding and abstract thought is of necessity 'reductive', social science, in its attempt to comprehend phenomena must inevitably, as Jameson suggests, "do violence to reality and experience" (1972:222). However, it should be stressed that a proper recognition of the essentially holistic nature of social phenomena is not necessarily in tension with Marx's fundamental premise that



material productive activity is the ultimately decisive factor in historical development (see 1973:99). On the contrary, what it illustrates once again is the necessity of conceiving social phenomena, such as those theorised in the base / superstructure relationship, as interactive, in line with Marx's dialectical method

Moreover, Mouffe herself is frequently reductionist in the way in which she tends to level all elements of social and political power to that of the ideological, i.e., in terms of the alleged ease with which they can be 'articulated' or 'disarticulated' (1981:174). Mouffe's own particular form of reductionism is also evident throughout her discussion of hegemony in the implicit levelling of the concretely political level of practice to that of the solely ideological and linguistic. The main criticism here involves once again Mouffe's failure to focus sufficient attention on the role of practice. This contrasts with Wittgenstein's interactive conception of the language/world. At the heart of this is the differential and non-reductive conception of language evident in Wittgenstein's analogy of the relation between the 'river' and 'river-bed' (language-game and form of life) in *On Certainty*. Wittgenstein exhibits a crucial awareness of the interlocking nature of concrete practices and the conceptual and linguistic ways in which we represent these to ourselves. Precisely because of the link between practices and language some ideological conceptions of the world 'stand fast' and are accordingly harder to 'disarticulate' than others. It stands as a central criticism of the analyses of Laclau, Mouffe and Hall, that they sever the link between concrete social practices, language and ideology.

What is missing in varying degrees within the analyses of Laclau, Mouffe and Hall, is any appreciation of the distinction between the various elements of discourse in terms of the ease or difficulty with which they are able to be criticised or disarticulated through discourse. E.M. Wood notes the "autonomization of ideology and politics" which occurs in the writings of Laclau and Mouffe (1986:ch4). This is an attempt to theoretically divorce language from the matrix of concrete human practices. In Wittgensteinian terms, it represents a one-sided reliance on what has previously been termed a 'language-game' level of analysis which functions in isolation from the crucial notion of a form of life.

In addition, as Wood argues, the theoretical perspective of Laclau and Mouffe: "...necessarily ascribes to intellectuals a predominant role in the socialist project, insofar as it relies on them to carry out no less a task than the construction of 'social agents' by means of ideology or discourse. In that case, the inchoate mass that constitutes the bulk of 'the people' still remains without a collective identity, except what it receives from its intellectual leaders, the bearers of discourse"(Wood, E.M., 1986:6, quoted in Smith, 1994:27).

## Chapter 13

### Theoretical Sources of Hall's Reading of Thatcherism: (2) The Writings of Gramsci

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This chapter looks at the importance of Gramsci's writings for Laclau, Mouffe and Hall. In particular, it critically examines the nature of their reading of Gramsci's conception of language which, it is argued, is one-sided. This is brought out by an illustration of the parallels which exist between Wittgenstein and Gramsci with respect to their understanding of the nature of language. The critical implications of this for Hall's analysis of Thatcherism are then examined.

In Hall's view: "Gramsci is one of the first modern Marxists to recognize that interests are not given but always have to be politically and ideologically constructed"(1988e:167). According to Hall's reading of Gramsci, "Politics for him is not a dependent sphere. It is where forces and relations, in the economy, in society, in culture, have to be actively worked on to produce particular forms of power, forms of domination...This conception of politics is *fundamentally contingent, fundamentally open-ended*"(1988e:169 emphasis added).

Clearly, importance is attached in Gramsci's writings to the idea of an ideological superstructure which is not simply reflective of the economic base. This is a key part of Gramsci's argument for the 'autonomy' of the state, politics and ideology. In Gramsci's writings there is an emphasis on the need for the capitalist state to govern through 'consent' achieved within civil society as opposed to the use of pure state force (Gramsci, 1971:80n.49,253,259). Class rule is not achieved and sustained solely through coercion. The dominant class must also strive to achieve cultural, moral, in short, ideological hegemony. The attraction of Gramsci's writings for many contemporary theorists is undoubtedly tied to the fact that the concept of hegemony appears to represent a significant redefinition of the nature of power in modern society.

The concept is thus appealing to those who wish to avoid the 'reductionism' associated with what they regard as the classical Marxist tradition in which the superstructure is allegedly determined by the economic base to an extent which renders talk of ideological or discursive 'autonomy' meaningless. Such theorists quite rightly wish to preserve the political significance of language and ideology. As we have already seen in the remarks above, this is certainly a key motivating factor in the case of Hall's appropriation of Gramsci's writings. Some measure of autonomy in these spheres is required in order to allow for the possibility of resistance and change, in other words, for politics itself.

However, as always, it is a question of how far we bend the stick here. It is equally damaging both in theoretical and concretely political terms to postulate any radical degree of autonomy to the realm of the ideological and discursive as it is to reduce the latter simply to reflections of the economic. Yet this is precisely the danger faced by those sections of contemporary social and political theory which have uncritically accepted (1) an image of Marxism as inherently reductionist; and (2) a reading of the linguistic turn which effectively autonomizes language as an asocial and unconstrained phenomenon. The writings of Gramsci, like those of Wittgenstein, are at the very heart of the debate over the meaning and implications of the linguistic turn for social and political theory. Theorists such as Laclau, Mouffe and Hall appeal to Gramsci's writings in order to argue for the notion that ideological terms and concepts are not fixed by class position, but are open to hegemonic strategies of disarticulation / rearticulation. Likewise, Laclau and Mouffe claim to find in Wittgenstein's writings a view of language consonant with their 'anti-reductionism', i.e., which denies that language is fixed by an extra-discursive reality. With respect to their interpretation of the writings of both Gramsci and Wittgenstein on language I shall argue that Laclau, Mouffe and Hall are wrong. In both cases there is a failure to recognise that for Gramsci and Wittgenstein language is an irreducibly social phenomenon.

### 13.1 Gramsci and Wittgenstein: A Non-Reductionist Conception of the Socially-embedded Nature of Language

Equally important, however, is that for Gramsci the superstructure is not conceived as 'free-floating'. As Gramsci points out, "...though hegemony is ethical-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity"(1971:160). This kind of clear acknowledgement by Gramsci of the concrete, social basis of hegemony stands in contrast to the appropriation of Gramsci by theorists such as Laclau, Mouffe and Hall. What it underlines is the fact that Gramsci's notion of the 'autonomy' of the ideological and discursive is, like Wittgenstein's notion of the 'autonomy' of language, context-specific and qualified. There will be times, in other words, when language and ideology is fixed to an important degree by extra-discursive reality. There is an important element of qualification and conditionality in the notion of autonomy advanced by Gramsci and Wittgenstein concerning language which stands in contrast to the universal nature of the claim made by Hall that we *must* think our problems in a Gramscian way, and that Thatcherism represents a new era in politics. Under the influence of a 'picture' of Marxism as 'economistic' and 'reductionist' with respect to language, Laclau, Mouffe and Hall get the balance wrong in concentrating on and ultimately reifying the ideological and discursive dimensions of Thatcherism at the expense of an analysis of the concrete economic and political power basis of the latter. The emphasis on the socially-embedded nature of language and thus ideology within concrete human practices shows Gramsci's perspective to be broadly in line with the underlying political import of a Wittgensteinian analysis.

As Gramsci argued: "language depends on the complex development of economic and social activity"("Contro un pregiudizio", *Avanti!*, Jan, 24, 1918, quoted in Mansfield, 1984:122). This restatement of Gramsci's dialectical conception of the language/world relationship is important in bringing out the similarities between this conception and that of Wittgenstein, and thereby countering the implicit linguistic reductionism underlying the analyses of theorists such as Hall, Mouffe, and Laclau. This emphasis on the socially-embedded nature of ideology within concrete human practices shows Gramsci's perspective to be broadly in line with the underlying

political import of a Wittgensteinian analysis properly understood. This is arguably where Hall et al get the balance wrong in concentrating on the ideological and discursive dimensions of Thatcherism at the expense of an analysis of the concrete economic and political practices within which language operates.

Equally important to recognise is the fact that, for Gramsci, such linguistic innovations as do occur will themselves necessarily be connected to and thus to some extent constrained by tradition (Mansfield, 1984:122). This key emphasis running throughout Gramsci's writings forms part of his overall rejection of the aesthetic subjectivism of the Crocean conception of language. According to Gramsci's understanding of language, "...innovations are possible only because they suit historically-laid possibilities"(Mansfield, 1984:122).

This is an important dimension of Gramsci's writings, and one whose implications are neglected in the appropriation of these writings by Laclau, Mouffe, and Hall. The key notion of the embedded, and therefore to a certain extent constrained nature of language, also finds a parallel in the writings of Wittgenstein which, as we have seen, emphasises the role of social practices and hinge propositions. In terms of Hall's analysis of the discursive factors allegedly lying behind the success of Thatcherism this element of constraint identified by Gramsci is important insofar as it renders suspect any universal, acontextual, and one-sided view of the constitutive power of language.

### *13.2 The Nature and Consequences of Hall's Interpretation of Gramsci*

According to Hall: "I do not claim that, in any simple way, Gramsci 'has the answers' or 'holds the key' to our present troubles. I do believe that we must 'think' our problems in a Gramscian way - which is different"(1988e:161). Hall's contention that "we must 'think' our problems in a Gramscian way" is of the utmost importance in critically examining and evaluating Hall's analysis of Thatcherism (1988a:7). In Hall's view, without Gramsci there can be no adequate explanation or account of the latter phenomenon; nor, Hall insists, can there be any adequate response to Thatcherism by the forces of the Left.

As the overall thrust of Hall's analysis of Thatcherism makes clear, he sets great store by the general point which he takes as underlying Gramsci's assertion that: "popular beliefs...are themselves material forces"(quoted in Hall, 1988a:9). This idea is closely related to the discussion above concerning the role of the superstructure vis-à-vis the economic base. We should not, however, leave unexamined the obvious but significant fact that Hall's reading of the Gramscian corpus is exactly that - one reading. The 'Gramscian way' in which we are encouraged to 'think our problems' is in fact no more than Hall's way.

According to Hall: "...one of the most important things that Gramsci has done for us is to give us a profoundly expanded conception of what politics itself is like, and thus also of power and authority. We cannot, after Gramsci, go back to the notion of mistaking electoral politics, or party politics in a narrow sense, or even the occupancy of state power, as constituting the ground of modern politics itself"(1988e:168).

One can certainly endorse the foregoing view. Indeed, who, we might ask, apart from the naivest of liberal apologists, ever believed that "electoral politics, or party politics in a narrow sense, or even the occupancy of state power" constituted the ground of modern politics? What this in fact illustrates is that in his homogenous characterisation of 'Left' or 'Labour' thought as narrowly electoralist or institutionally formal Hall has once again succeeded to a large extent in setting up the debate in advance in order to present so-called hegemonic politics as a new and crucial departure in ideological strategy.

The 'expanded conception of politics' referred to by Hall and attributed almost exclusively to his interpretation of the writings of Gramsci is in fact arguably one of the single most important consequences of the linguistic turn in general, properly understood. It is brought about, in particular, through the highlighting of the political significance of the role of the conceptual, the discursive, and the ideological. Indeed, despite the fact that it is never explicitly stated as such, the underlying logic and implications of this insight into the relations between language and politics is detectable throughout the later writings of Wittgenstein. This 'expanded conception of politics' only follows, however, when we investigate, as Wittgenstein does, the implications of language conceived as a truly social phenomenon. As argued in



sections I and II, the impact of the Saussurean paradigm as exemplified in the writings of poststructuralism and postmodernism has been to depoliticize language by implicitly removing it from the network of social practices and unequal power relations which forms its context of operation. This also occurs in the case of certain interpretations of Gramsci's writings.

The key to understanding Gramsci's originality, according to Taylor, lies in the fact that the private ownership of the means of production is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for capitalist domination. Consequently, the political, cultural, and ideological dimensions of class struggle are important factors within the writings of Gramsci (1995:257). However, as Hoffman points out, the Gramscian perspective represents a "combination of the ideological and the coercive...if the two moments are to be distinguished analytically, in the real world they are to be found only in synthesis. In actual society they are 'one and the same'"(1986:63). The relationship, as Williams argues, is in fact "a complex and reciprocal interaction dialectically conceived" ("Gramsci's Concept of *Egemonia*", p.587, quoted in Hoffman, 1986:66).

Of importance here are the parallels between the Gramscian conception of the hegemony/force nexus and Wittgenstein's view of the socially-embedded nature of language and practice. In both cases the location of the realms of the cultural and ideological, within particular concrete forms of life constrains and qualifies any implied autonomy. According to Barrett: "It is not clear whether Gramsci uses hegemony strictly to refer to the non-coercive (ideological?) aspects of the organisation of consent, or whether he uses it to explore the relationship between coercive and non-coercive forms of securing consent"(1991:54). The first formulation offered by Barrett of Gramsci's possible intent corresponds to what can be termed a 'language-game' level of analysis; while the second represents the more adequate Wittgensteinian holistic conception of the language/world relationship expressed in the notion of a 'form of life'.

The point here is that an overestimation of the discursive dimensions of hegemony by commentators such as Laclau, Mouffe and Hall frequently leads to an apolitical and untenably autonomous conception of those elements of the superstructure such as language, ideology and the state itself. Thus, according to Hoffman: "[Gramsci's]

concept of hegemony challenges the whole notion of the state as a class instrument and lays the basis for transcending the very base/superstructure 'metaphor' central to classical historical materialism"(1986:4). For Gramsci, however, the state consists of the "*entire complex of practical and theoretical activities* with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules" (1971:244, emphasis added). As Gramsci points out: "the conception of historical bloc [is one] in which precisely material forces are the content and ideologies the form, though this distinction between form and content has purely didactic value, since the material forces would be inconceivable historically without form and the ideologies would be individual fancies without the material forces"(*Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, p.377, quoted in Barrett, 1991:53). Gramsci's position is mirrored in the social holism of Wittgenstein's perspective in which: "...the term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life"(PI §23).

There is then a tendency to downplay the significance of this holistic conception of the ideological and the practical, the discursive and the extradiscursive in appropriations of Gramsci. As already suggested, it is precisely Gramsci's alleged 'autonomization' of the discursive and the ideological which renders his perspective supposedly unique in the eyes of theorists such as Laclau, Mouffe and Hall. This theme is, however, greatly overplayed and based on a selective reading of Gramsci's writings.

A predominantly language-game level of analysis is detectable, for example, in Hall's reading of and reliance on the Gramscian notion of hegemony. According to Hall, hegemony "...entails a quite different conception of how social forces and movements, in their diversity, can be articulated into a set of strategic alliances. To construct a new cultural order, you need not to reflect an already-formed collective will, but to fashion a new one, to inaugurate a new historic project"(1988e:170). On Hall's reading of Gramsci, however, there is little or no recognition of the key Wittgensteinian distinction between hinge propositions and others, or of the various material and practical routines and constraints of human social existence which help

to sustain the former in place. Yet this is precisely the sort of element required in order to account for the failure of Thatcherism as a strategy and exercise in hegemonic politics to 'displace', 'deconstruct', or 'disarticulate' such widespread notions as the continued perception of a class-divided society in the popular consciousness. While the evidence is neither straightforwardly self-evident or uncontentious the existence of other equally significant hinge propositions is reflected in the findings of opinion polls and *British Social Attitudes* surveys throughout the Thatcher period (see chapter 16). All of which suggests it is not the case, as Hall's account implies, that all of our current ideological conceptions or representations concerning the sphere of the socio-political are equally 'up for grabs' in terms of their amenability to ideological strategies of discursive disarticulation.

However, according to Hall: "...as Thatcherism clearly shows, *politics actually works more like the logic of language*: you can always put it another way if you try hard enough"(1988f:273, emphasis added). The 'logic' and the conception of language in question here are, however, distinctly Saussurean. As in the writings of Laclau and Mouffe, language is conceived along the lines of an essentially insulated and self-functioning 'system'. The logic of relational interaction between the elements of this system facilitates the discursive conception of hegemonic politics with its stress on the infinite possibility of disarticulation and rearticulation. In contrast to the dialectical conception of Gramsci and Wittgenstein, what we have in the above passage is the implicit assumption by Hall of the power of the discursive over that of the material. In Wittgensteinian terms it is an assumption which fails to distinguish between those propositions which 'stand fast' in the political conscience of the populace (e.g. the consistently expressed desirability of increased public health spending in the case of Hall's particular discussion), and those others which do not stand quite so fast and are consequently more susceptible, at least in principle, to hegemonic strategies of disarticulation. The predominance of the discursive and ideological in Hall's analysis leads to a downplaying of the various extra-discursive mechanisms which exist in the form of the various human social practices which help to hold the former range of propositions in place.

In the significance which it imputes to the realm of the discursive, Hall's analysis, like that of Lyotard and Rorty, is found wanting when compared to the politics of language exemplified by the Aristotelian tradition of rhetoric. In particular, the fundamental recognition by the latter that to be politically and persuasively effective such 'articulations' must to some extent reflect or speak to the currently existing 'doxa' of the intended audience (see above, p.90, and n12). The conception of language and its relation to the social and political sphere which we find in the writings of Aristotle, as in those of Wittgenstein and Gramsci, recognises that the range, content, and political efficacy of ideological or rhetorical articulation is variously constrained by the fact that language is a socially-embedded phenomenon, rather than a purely semiotic realm of 'difference'.

### 13.3 *Hegemony Versus*

#### *'Class-Reductionist' Explanation*

We have already referred to the intimate connection which exists between the nature of Hall's analysis of Thatcherism and his reliance on a particular reading of the writings of Gramsci. The incompatibility which Hall sees between an account of Thatcherism based on the concept of hegemonic politics and others is merely a further instance of this. As Hall acknowledges: "I have deliberately used the Gramscian term 'hegemony' in order to foreclose any falling back on the notion that Thatcherism is merely another name for the exercise of the same, old, familiar class domination by the same, old, familiar ruling class. 'Hegemony' implies: the struggle to contest and dis-organize an existing political formation; the taking of the 'leading position' (on however minority a basis) over a number of different spheres of society at once - economy, civil society, intellectual and moral life, culture; the conduct of a wide and differentiated type of struggle; the winning of a strategic measure of popular consent; and, thus, the securing of a social authority sufficiently deep to conform society into a new historic project"(1988a:7).

In addition to noting the *a priori* character of Hall's approach here, as indicated by the desire to 'foreclose', we can question whether Gramsci actually counterposes an explanation or analysis in terms of hegemony, and a so-called 'class-reductionist' account as explanatory extremes in the way in which Hall's account implies. Hall's

argument in fact relies on a specifically Eurocommunist interpretation of Gramsci's writings, i.e., one which for political as well as philosophical reasons wishes to significantly marginalize or downplay the explanatory importance of the concept of class. What is involved in the Eurocommunist interpretation of Gramsci's political thought is an effective detachment of the line of thought underlying Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* from the rest of his writings. As Ashman argues, Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* "are singled out precisely because of the sometimes vague and abstract nature of their formulations. Stuart Hall sums this up in his introduction when he says, 'What was undoubtedly a limitation from a textual point of view—namely, the fragmentary nature of his writings—was, for us, a positive advantage'"(1991:127). As Mark Perryman notes: "Without Gramsci the analysis of Thatcherism pioneered by *Marxism Today* would scarcely have been credible"(Changes, 19 January-1 February 1991, quoted in Ashman, 1991:123).

Thus Gramsci, as Hoffman notes, is frequently acclaimed as the father of Eurocommunism (1986:5). However, as Hoffman points out, "...the relationship between Gramsci and Eurocommunism is rather more complex than is often assumed. *Whereas Gramsci sought to integrate the 'war of manoeuvre' with the 'war of position'...Eurocommunist theoreticians tend to treat them as separate strategic options; while Gramsci attempted to unite hegemony with force, in Eurocommunism a mechanically 'hypostasized' consent serves as the identifying attribute of a separate road to socialism*"(1986:150).

As a result of the downplaying of class for political and philosophical reasons, a particularly heavy emphasis thus comes to be placed on ideological struggle (See Callinicos, 1985:128). Gramsci is seen as a cure for Marxism's alleged 'economism', and for the fact that classical Marxism allegedly failed to develop an adequate theory of politics. The crucial point is that language and ideology come to be viewed as class-neutral and detachable. In this way, and quite contrary to the spirit of Gramsci's writings considered as a whole, the notion of hegemony is analytically divorced from what are taken to be the 'reductionist' or 'economistic' implications of a class analysis of ideology. The Eurocommunist interpretation of hegemony thus dovetails

neatly with a key tenet taken over by Hall from the Laclau/Mouffe analysis of ideology and language, namely the alleged non-class nature of both of the latter.

In this sense the heightened emphasis on discursive politics and ideology can be viewed as a theorisation of the concrete politics of the Popular Front (Wood, E.M., 1986:51). As Benton argues with respect to Eurocommunism: "it is debatable how far...it was an attempt to give theoretical recognition to a political practice already adopted, untheorised"(1984:152). In an important sense, what we have here is essentially a political practice, namely left-reformist social democracy, in search of theoretical justification; a justification sought and found, however, only in a one-sided and selective reading of Gramsci's writings.

#### 13.4 *Gramsci on Language*

Gramsci once expressed a good deal of hostility to the idea put forward by sections of the Italian Socialist Party in 1918 in favour of viewing Esperanto as the "linguistic expression of the international battle"(Buci-Glucksmann, 1980:9). While the exact reasons remain unclear, one can plausibly speculate that Gramsci regarded this concern with Esperanto as a potentially dangerous diversion from concrete political and social struggles. While the latter were frequently signalled by developments within, and battles over the nature and domain of language and ideology, they were not confined to this sphere (see *ibid*, p.10). Gramsci was also no doubt critical of the false ideological sense of homogeneity generated by the notion of a putatively universal language such as Esperanto, which would merely mask the real struggles for hegemony taking place within the sphere of practical politics as well as in the sphere of the linguistic and cultural.

Wittgenstein also exhibited a hostile reaction to the idea of Esperanto, and indeed towards the whole idea of artificially created languages (1980:52). What I want to suggest is that there is an underlying reason which unites the concerns of both Gramsci and Wittgenstein on this issue. Part of the basis of Wittgenstein's hostility is to the idea that we need to create an 'ideal language' rather than come to properly understand the one which we have. Because of the social conception of language which they share, both Wittgenstein and Gramsci are also critical of the implicit



linguistic reductionism behind the proposal, i.e., the notion that a change in words or language alone as opposed to human practices is enough either to win the class struggle or to end 'bewitchment'.

### 13.5 Gramsci, Hegemony and the Classical Marxist Tradition

As Barrett notes, the Italian word *egemonia* is often viewed solely in connection with the writings of Gramsci (1991:54). However, the roots of the concept, as Perry Anderson and others have shown, actually lie in pre-Revolutionary Russia and the debates which took place over the need for the proletariat to achieve 'hegemony' over the peasantry (Barrett, 1991:54). Gramsci himself pays tribute to Lenin, who he says has given "new weight - in opposition to the various 'economist' tendencies - to the force of cultural struggle, and constructed the doctrine of hegemony as a complement to the theory of the State-as-force"(*Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, p. 56, quoted in Hoffman, 1986:67).

As Hoffman points out, the roots of Gramsci's writings in classical Marxism and Leninism are frequently understated or ignored (1986:52). However, the concept of hegemony, as Hoffman points out, can also be seen in earlier Marxist writings such as Marx's notion of the proletariat as a 'universal class', and in Lenin's concept of the proletariat as hegemonic on becoming the 'ideological leader of the democratic process'(1986:53). Similarly, according to Buci-Glucksmann, Gramsci's concept of hegemony was "borrowed from Lenin"(1980:175). As Hoffman argues: "...the 'rediscovery' of Antonio Gramsci serves to demonstrate the importance and *not the neglect*, of consent in classical Marxism. The famous 'antinomies' centred around Machiavelli's Centaur, the levels of force and consent, authority and hegemony, violence and civilization,...etc., all reflect a broad view of politics and the state which Gramsci shared with Lenin, Marx and Engels"(1986:59, emphasis added). That the concept of hegemony is part of the Marxist tradition is a fact recognised by Gramsci himself. As he wrote: "Bolshevism is the first movement in the international history of class struggle to have developed the idea of the hegemony of the proletariat, to have posed in practice the chief problems of the revolution that Marx presented in theory. The idea of the hegemony of the proletariat, because it was conceived



historically and concretely, involved the requirement of seeking an ally for the working class in the poor peasants”(Ordine Nuovo, I March 1924, quoted in Buci-Glucksmann, 1980:177).

These points are significant in underlining the continuity between Gramsci and the Marxist tradition; something which for rhetorical and political purposes frequently goes unacknowledged in the writings of Laclau, Mouffe and Hall. They are also important in countering the interpretation of Gramsci which tends to rely, either explicitly or implicitly, on an emphasis of the formative influence of Crocean idealism on Gramsci's writings. As Hoffman correctly points out: “The development of Gramsci's political theory cannot be understood without some consideration being given to his relationship with Croce...What is more contentious is the question of how far these early formulations...influence Gramsci's later writings...”(1986:61). The issue thus centres on whether or not Crocean idealism was a significant and lasting influence on Gramsci. Depending on the particular writings (early or late) relied on by commentators, it is possible to derive support for the interpretation of Gramsci's work as supposedly distinctive and representative of a qualitative break with ‘traditional Marxism’. The writings of Laclau, Mouffe and Hall are implicitly committed to the latter kind of interpretation, foregrounding, as they do, the alleged significance of the ‘superstructural’, ‘cultural’ and ‘ideological’ in Gramsci's writings. As already argued, however, this ignores Gramsci's emphasis on language, hegemony and ideology as socially situated.

Also important is the issue of Gramsci's incarceration and its impact on subsequent interpretations of the contemporary significance of his writings. As Barrett argues: “The conditions under which he wrote...obviously have a bearing on the nature of the texts we have...his works incorporate many strategies and detours related to the prison censor. These bald facts explain, to some extent anyway, the relatively fragmentary and ‘open’ nature of these crucial writings”(1991:52). We have already noted Hall's recognition of the importance of the ‘open’ nature of Gramsci's writings, a fact which he regards as a positive development from the point of view of secondary interpretations. The crucial point here is that any such ‘strategies and detours’ engaged in by Gramsci will tend to have been those which are orientated

towards the 'reformist' end of the spectrum, in line with the recognised need to meet censorial approval. In this sense it is hardly surprising if the writings appear to evince an overriding concern with the realm of the cultural and the ideological. The difficulty, however, arises when the pragmatic and enforced nature of such strategies and the interpretation of Gramsci's writings which they support is overlooked. In the course of remarking on Gramsci's inconsistency with respect to the notion of hegemony, Perry Anderson suggests that Gramsci's focus moved towards a consensual interpretation of the notion "as a result of getting the coercion-related arguments past the prison censor" ("The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci", p.49, quoted in Barrett, 1991:55).

### The Concept of 'Discourse'

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#### 14.1 *The Ambiguous Nature of Hall's Relation to the Discourse Theory Perspective*

Hall's analysis of Thatcherism is dependent on a particular understanding of the concept of 'discourse'. As Hall acknowledges: "I believe that discourse theory has much to tell us about how Thatcherism accomplishes the condensation of different discourses into its contradictory formation, and how it 'works' so as to recruit people to its different, often contradictory, subject positions: even though it has had only partial success in its project to construct a new kind of political 'subject'" (1988d:157).

However, Hall is also insistent that his conception of the notion of discourse is to be clearly distinguished from that found in the writings of Laclau and Mouffe. As Hall argues: "...I have long ago definitively dissociated myself from the discourse theoretical approach to the analysis of whole social formations, or even from the idea that the production of new subjectivities provides, in itself, an adequate theory of ideology...In doing so, I have also tried carefully to demarcate the immensely fruitful things which I learned from Ernesto Laclau's *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* from the dissolution of everything into discourse which, I believe, mars the later volume, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, despite its many insights" (1988d:157).

Hall clearly wishes to steer some sort of 'middle course' between what he considers to be the 'economism' of classical Marxism, and the 'discursive dissolution' of Laclau's, and by implication, Mouffe's later writings. I shall argue that Hall is, however, ultimately unsuccessful in this attempt. His frequent disclaimers notwithstanding, he is in the end committed to an acceptance of the

discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe. The chief reason for this is, as already indicated, Hall's desire to avoid what he regards as the unacceptable implications of the classical Marxist tradition towards language. Hall is in fact driven by a 'picture' of what the latter consists of in the same way in which a 'picture' of language led the early Wittgenstein to formulate the doctrine of the *Tractatus*.

This is not to say that the picture bears no resemblance whatsoever to reality. It is certainly possible to locate 'Marxist' theoreticians whose writings exemplify just the sort of reductionism with respect to language which Laclau, Mouffe and Hall claim to rail against. The chief culprit from the point of view of Laclau, Mouffe and Hall would appear to be Althusser whose version of 'structuralism' is alleged to conceive of human beings merely as bearers ('tragers') of systemic forces rather than social agents capable of transcending the latter. Whatever the merits of Althusser's writings, the point is that they do not constitute the 'Marxist tradition' as is frequently implied in the writings of Laclau, Mouffe and Hall. A dearth of references to this 'tradition' is in fact one of the most striking things about these writings. As already suggested, a good deal of critical and rhetorical work is done in the writings of Laclau, Mouffe and Hall by the straw man of 'Marxism' as 'economistic' and 'reductionist' with respect to language. Just as the early Wittgenstein began with the assumption that language necessarily pictured reality, so it is assumed *a priori* in the writings of Laclau, Mouffe and Hall that Marxism is a homogenous tradition theoretically unequipped to handle the emergence of 'revolutionary' political phenomena such as Thatcherism.

As a result of the picture which drives Hall what we find in his writings on Thatcherism is a fundamental equivocation between viewing language as a socially-embedded and constrained phenomenon - what I shall term a 'form of life' level of analysis; and viewing language, in line with the Saussurean paradigm, as radically indeterminate and infinitely open to strategies of hegemonic appropriation. The latter I shall term a 'language-game' level of analysis to denote the fact that, unlike Wittgenstein, there is in the writings of Laclau, Mouffe and Hall an inadequate recognition of the constraints imposed by the social nature of language.

#### 14.2 *Hall's Equivocation Between Structural and Discursive Explanation*

Hall insists throughout his analysis that it is essential for the Left to capture Thatcherite ideas rather than simply counterposing other ideas to the latter (1988a:14-15). In other words, it is no good, according to Hall, to analyse Thatcherism in terms of class and to argue on the basis of such an analysis for an alternative. If we do this, argues Hall, we are bound merely to reinforce the success of Thatcherism which has succeeded in capturing the key signifiers of social and political debate. However, this sort of advice is strange when we consider what Hall says about the rise of Thatcherism itself. According to Hall, the Right was able to 'discursively characterise' the events of the 1960's in such a way that this eventually led to a shift in 'the popular mood' during the late 1970's (refs). There are two ways to look at this process both of which are damaging to Hall's thesis of hegemonic politics. One is to say that the changes were brought about discursively and ideologically. In other words, the Right was able to change how we saw the period in question. This implies, however, that during the period which Hall describes here the Right must have been involved, and successfully so, in precisely the sort of process which Hall denies to the Left, namely, the counterposing of ideas to those which are currently dominant.

If, on the other hand, this is not the case, then some other range of factors must have been responsible for the shift in the 'popular mood'. This would be the second way of looking at the process. And here an eminently plausible candidate would be the identification of shifts in real economic and social conditions i.e., changes at the level of a form of life which are not unrestrictedly amenable to discursive rearticulation. If this is the case then, contrary to Hall's stated position, Thatcherism was not a unique political phenomenon relying for its success on the exercise of a discursively based hegemonic politics.

The same problem of the inconsistent privileging of the discourse of Thatcherism emerges in the course of Hall's references to economic policy. According to Hall, Keynesianism as an option "is now closed. It's exhausted. Nobody believes in it any more. Its material conditions have disappeared. The ordinary British people won't

vote for it because they know in their bones that life is not like that any more”(1988e:172). There are several points worth noting here. Firstly, there is Hall’s recognition of the determination of the ideological and discursive by ‘material conditions’ and the absence of any possible ‘rearticulation’ of the concept of Keynesianism as a preferable economic and political strategy. Hall’s equivocation between structural and discursive factors contradicts his own reading of the discursive and ideologically enabled rise of Thatcherism. Why should Hall insist that Keynesianism as an option ‘is now closed’ when the same type of ideologically exploitable opportunities which allegedly provided the conditions for the rise of Thatcherism - economic crisis, the failure of the previous Labour governments etc. - were all being repeated at various points during Thatcher’s term in office, thus paving the way for another possible disarticulation/ rearticulation of currently extant political ‘common sense’? In addition, it also has to be remembered that Thatcherism did not come to power openly advocating the ‘free market’ dogma which only came later. In this sense there was no ‘disarticulation’ by Thatcherism of the key signifiers associated with social democracy such as a commitment to the social provision of health care etc. The electoral victory of Thatcher in 1979 was the result of dissatisfaction with Labour rather than any positive endorsement of Thatcherism.

#### 14.3 *Hall’s Uncritical and Contradictory Lapse into a Realist Political Ontology*

Despite the insistence on the importance of ‘the political imaginary’, and on the crucial role of ‘description’, ‘redefinition’, and the struggle for hegemony pursued through conceptual and linguistic ‘articulation’ and ‘disarticulation’, Hall frequently lapses into what from his own perspective can only be described as a form of uncritical realism. This comes out, for example, in his discussion of the supposed ‘realities’ of Thatcherism and the then contemporary political landscape. Hall writes, for example, of the need to “Submit everything to the discipline of *present reality*”. This ‘reality’, however, turns out to consist of “*our* [i.e. Hall’s] *understanding* of the forces which are *really* shaping and changing our world” (1988a:14 *emphases added*). Hall in fact begins with a conception of the allegedly revolutionary nature of

Thatcherism and its impact and from this proceeds to deduce what political and social 'reality' consists of.

According to Hall: "...if we are to be effective, politically, it can only be on the basis of a serious analysis of *things as they are*, not as we would wish them to be" (1988b:41 emphasis added). Once again Hall's discursive analysis of Thatcherism is one which precisely denies any reliance on this type of realist assumption to those on 'the Left' who might still rightly wish to retain and employ explanatory and analytical concepts such as 'really existing capitalism' etc. We need, in other words, to note the nature of the prescriptive consequences which flow from the asymmetrical nature of Hall's analysis here.

It is worth exploring some of the implications of this asymmetry further. In line with Laclau and Mouffe, it is, for example, Hall's contention that "the political character of our ideas cannot be guaranteed by our class position or by the 'mode of production'" (1988e:167). Hall, however, goes on to argue that "it is possible for the right to construct a politics which does speak to people's experience" (1988e:167). If we consider the first quotation above, Hall's position is that the political efficacy of discourse is not tied to or constrained by the conditions of objective social reality. In other words, there is nothing to prevent Thatcherism as a hegemonic project from 'capturing' and 'rearticulating' the concepts and ideas of working class people. In the second quotation it is implicitly conceded that the success of discourse (and hence the exercise of hegemonic politics) depends on the ability to "speak to people's experience". This presupposes an 'experience' that is not merely discursively constructed.

Hall's position as exemplified in the first quotation above is in line with the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe. It is also consonant with the Saussurean conception of language as radicalized by poststructuralism in which meanings are not fixed by any extra-discursive reality, but rather 'slide' relationally. One important implication of this is the relative unfixity or degree of malleability of ideological structures. Acceptance of this line of thought leads to a loosening of any ties between the levels of language-game and form of life in Hall's analysis. This is manifested in a failure to adequately distinguish between hinge propositions and others, or to



enquire into just what it might have been within the concrete everyday practices of people which counteracted attempts at the ideological disarticulations/ rearticulations of Thatcherism.

However, the underlying logic of the second quotation reveals Hall's position on the role of language, at least at this point in his analysis, to be much closer to the perspective of Wittgenstein. In particular, there is the implicit recognition of the concrete socially and institutionally embedded notion of a 'people's experience'. Hall, however, never actually achieves his aim of a partial or selectively limited appropriation of the arguments of Laclau and Mouffe without also buying into the linguistic idealism of the latter. Hall is insufficiently attentive to the equally powerful articulations which Thatcherism as an ideologically discursive project was unable to disarticulate or dislodge from the popular consciousness.

Hall is initially driven towards the writings of Laclau and Mouffe by the perceived need to dissociate his analysis from what he regards as the 'reductionist' or 'economistic' explanatory failings of a supposedly Marxist approach. As already suggested, the latter approach in effectively functions as a straw man or 'picture' throughout Hall's account.

There are, then, a number of considerations which suggest that Hall's account, despite his repeated denial that he is verging towards an 'idealist' or reductionist pole of explanation, cannot be viewed as resting at a predominantly form of life level of analysis. There is, for example, Hall's frequently stated antipathy towards what he regards as any 'reductionist' account of the sphere of the linguistic and ideological. This means that he is committed in principle from the start to awarding the latter a greater degree of autonomy than other accounts of the base/superstructure relation. His adherence to the theoretical tenet, derived as we have seen chiefly from the writings of Laclau and Mouffe, that the realm of ideology and discursive description or interpellation is necessarily "non-class belonging" in character, entails a predisposition to reject as theoretically and politically inadequate any account which postulates the idea of restrictions on the efficacy of the linguistic, discursive or ideological realm.

Hall thus begins in an essentially *a priori* fashion with the assumption that what he regards as a 'classical' Marxist analysis is necessarily inadequate to such a task. It is therefore important to note again the extent to which such designations as 'classical Marxist' form a key rhetorical element in Hall's argument alongside frequent references to "the Left" etc., all of which key notions are left largely undefined and unreferenced. Their chief function is to facilitate the construction of the straw man which Hall's preferred explanatory alternative requires in order to gain initial credibility, and to enable him to distinguish his account from a standard Marxist or materialist one. Hall's 'argument' involves the claim that a 'classical' Marxist analysis is structurally and conceptually unable to account for what Hall regards as the crucial role of language, or discursive ideology in the sphere of contemporary politics. Given this presupposition, Hall is then clearly obliged to consider alternatives which he believes are more able to account in theoretical terms for the supposedly increased significance of the discursive or ideological realm within the contemporary sphere of the socio-political .

#### 14.4 *Discourse in the Writings of Laclau, Mouffe and Hall*

The concept of 'discourse' denotes, broadly speaking, a concern with the ways in which particular structures of language and meaning make certain forms of conduct possible (Howarth, 1995:115). A focus on discourse also recognises that hegemonic struggles are central to political processes. From a discourse perspective, hegemony "is about which political force will decide the dominant forms of conduct and meaning in a given social context"(Howarth, 1995:124). In the case of Thatcher, this involved the hegemonisation of certain key 'floating signifiers': 'the people', 'the nation', 'freedom', 'individualism', etc. Such signifiers, according to Hall, began to 'float' during the crisis of the late 70's (Howarth, 1995:127). According to Hall, Thatcherism successfully instituted a new political frontier in British politics and society through the construction of antagonistic relationships between those interpolated by her discourse and those excluded (Howarth, 1995:127). Hegemony is thus seen to be achieved "if and when one political project or force determines the rules and meanings in a particular social formation" (Howarth, 1995:124).

What discourse analysis frequently overlooks, however, is the fact that rule-following is an irreducibly social phenomenon. It is, in other words, inextricably linked with the concrete practices and unequal relations of power which characterise society itself. As such, it is not compatible with a conception of language as semiotic i.e., in which meanings are infinitely 'free-floating' and detached from such factors. This is, however, the conception of language which underlies Hall's reference to "the construction of antagonistic relationships" by Thatcherism. This excludes from the start the possibility that Thatcher's discourse might simply have mirrored changes in those concrete antagonistic relationships which have always existed in the form of class struggle.

#### 14.5 *A Wittgensteinian Critique of Discourse Theory*

According to Howarth, discourse theory "does not deny the existence of a reality outside our heads and external to our thoughts"(1995:127). Discourse theory, argues Howarth, merely "parts company with realism in its claim that there is no 'extra-discursive' realm of meaningful objects"(1995:127). Discourse theory rejects the view that this independent realm of objects determines their meaning. From a discourse theory perspective, such objects become meaningful only as part of a wider discursive framework.

Deployment of the concept of discourse, however, often results in a purely semiotic conception of social relations and structures. In this sense, the discourse approach is potentially idealist for it can lead to the reduction of reality to our concepts and ideas about it. What goes unacknowledged are the concrete constraints on political actions and practices, not to mention access to discursive resources themselves. In the desperate attempt to avoid at all costs any form of 'economism' or 'reductionism' too much stress is placed on the indeterminacy of social structures and thus on the possibility for solely discursively based action and change. Howarth, for example, recognises that limits exist, but continues to construe limits on political action in terms of discourse (1995:129). Howarth apparently believes that once limits have been "registered as...object[s] of discourse" this somehow renders them less powerful (1995:130). The economy is thus treated as "a discursive

formation”(1995:130). Similarly, there is a levelling of all social forces and structures in which economic forces are equated with sexual and individual ‘lifestyle’ politics (1995:130). Likewise, discourse theory frequently views state institutions merely as “sedimented discourses” (Burr, 1995:132).

This is not to deny the importance of the constitutive dimensions of discourse. As Hall rightly notes, “How we ‘see’ ourselves and our social relations matters, because it enters into and informs our actions and practices. Ideologies are therefore a site of a different type of social struggle”(1981:33). Those discourses which help to form our identity clearly have implications for what we can and cannot do, as in the construction of notions of the ‘feminine’, and the ‘individual’ etc (Burr, 1995:54ff). However, we also have to ask why particular constructions should come to assume or continue to enjoy such a widespread hold and acceptance. The most plausible answer, and one in line with a Wittgensteinian perspective on language, is that discourses are not free-floating, autonomous or self-establishing and sustaining structures, but are “intimately connected to the way that society is organised and run”(Burr, 1995:54).

This is an important point in countering the linguistic idealism frequently implicit in the accounts offered by theorists such as Laclau, Mouffe and Hall. It problematises any simple notion of an easily achieved ‘disarticulation’ brought about solely by developments at the level of the discursive. As E.M. Wood argues: “The theoretical tendency to autonomise ideology and politics is, at its most extreme, associated with a drift towards the establishment of language or ‘discourse’ as the dominant principle of life, and...with the ultimate dissociation of ideology and consciousness from any social and historical base”(1986:5). Wood’s critique of Laclau and Mouffe parallels Wittgenstein’s insistence on the relationship between language-game and form of life.

A Wittgensteinian perspective also stands as a criticism of the notion of the ‘contingent’ nature of discourse. It contradicts, in particular, the dichotomy operative in the writings of Laclau, Mouffe, and Hall: either everything is rigidly determined by economic and class position, or else everything in the social sphere is ‘contingent’ and equally susceptible to discursive strategies of disarticulation /rearticulation. Either we embrace Marxism which is judged to be a system founded on the idea that

all ideology and forms of social consciousness are rigidly determined by objective and inexorable economic forces, or else we accept the idea that language and social structures are fundamentally contingent. The failure to distinguish between language-game and form of life, and between hinge-propositions and others runs throughout the analyses of Laclau, Mouffe, and Hall. The implicit premise is that all social identities and ideologies are equally discursively negotiable since there are no effective social constraints on any such process (Wood, E.M., 1986:78). From a Wittgensteinian perspective there is a failure to recognise the socially-embedded nature of language and the constraints imposed by its place within particular networks of concrete human practices or forms of life.

## Chapter 15

### The Hegemonic Project of Thatcherism

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In Hall's view, the role of language and ideological contestation is crucial in order to adequately comprehend Thatcherism as a political phenomenon. As Hall argues: "Ideologically, Thatcherism is seen as forging new discursive articulations between the liberal discourses of the 'free market' and economic man and the organic conservative themes of tradition, family and nation, respectability and order"(1988a:2). Thatcherism is also portrayed as offering what Hall terms a "narrative"(1988a: 2). According to Hall: "the effectivity of Thatcherism has rested precisely on its ability to articulate different social and economic interests"(1988a:4). All of this, argues Hall, shows that Thatcherism, unlike the Left, is aware of "the recomposition and 'fragmentation' of the historic relations of representation between classes and parties; the shifting boundaries between state and civil society, 'public' and 'private'; the emergence of new arenas of contestation, new sites of social antagonism, new social movements, and new social subjects and political identities in contemporary society"(1988a: 2).

#### 15.1 *The Thatcherite Conception of Politics*

What Hall wishes to focus on is what he regards as the heightened role of the discursive and the ideological in the sphere of contemporary politics. According to Hall: "We have seen over the last decade...an intense and prolonged contestation within the same ideological terrain over some of the leading ideas which shape practical consciousness and influence our political practice and allegiances - those of 'freedom', 'choice', 'the people', 'the public good'; and what constitutes, and who can and cannot claim, 'Englishness'"(1988a: 9). It is Hall's contention that: "Thatcher 'set the scene' for her ascendancy...in the late 1970s, [by] remorselessly punctuating the world into a series of vividly contrasting images - Labour's 'statism' against her 'freedom' - making the flat earth of consensus politics into a contested

battle-zone”(1988f:277). The discourse of Thatcherism was in Hall's view not merely reflective but constitutive of political reality. According to Hall: “The ideology of the radical right is less an ‘expression’ of economic recession than the recession’s condition of existence. Ideological factors have effects on and for the social formation as a whole - including effects on the economic crisis itself and how it is likely to be politically resolved”(1988b:41).

In contrast to the “narrow, corporate and electoralist conception of politics” dominating official Labour thinking and strategy, Thatcherism, according to Hall, represents an “expanded, multifaceted and hegemonic conception of politics as a ‘war of position’...Politics is understood here in terms of the different modalities of power (cultural, moral and intellectual, as well as economic and political)”(1988a:3). As will become clear below, the particular nature of Hall’s appropriation of Gramsci plays a crucial role in his argument at this point and throughout his analysis of Thatcherism.

### *15.2 Thatcherism and the Remaking of Common Sense*

It is a central contention of Hall’s account that Thatcherism, via the pursuit of this expanded, hegemonic conception of politics, succeeded in having a revolutionary impact on the political scene. A crucial element within this overall project, it is argued, has been an ideological strategy aimed at an appropriation and rearticulation of what constitutes ‘the popular’ in the minds of the electorate and society as a whole. According to Hall, “Thatcherism’s ‘populism’ signals its unexpected ability to harness to its project certain popular discontents, to cut across and between the different divisions in society and to connect with certain aspects of popular experience”(1988a:6). Again: “We can see this construction of ideological cross-alliances between ‘Thatcherism’ and ‘the people’ actually going on in the very structure of Mrs. Thatcher’s own rhetoric”(1988b:49). According to Hall: “People don’t vote for Thatcherism...because they believe the small print...What Thatcherism as an ideology does, is to address the fears, the anxieties, the lost identities, of a people. It invites us to think about politics in images. It is addressed to our collective fantasies, to Britain as an imagined community, to the social imaginery”(1988e:167).



As Hall argues: “To a significant extent, Thatcherism is about the remaking of common sense: its aim is to become the ‘common sense of the age’”(1988:8) (See also 1988e:164). And, according to Hall: “The colonization of the popular press was a critical victory in this struggle to define the common sense of the times. Here was undertaken the critical ideological work of constructing around ‘Thatcherism’ a populist common sense”(1988b:48). One instance of the alleged political significance of this reconstruction of common sense is located by Hall in the debate over the future course of health spending. Thus, according to Hall, “Despite the crisis [in the NHS], Thatcherism continues to hold the high ground because, among large sections of the population (including Labour voters), the political ideological thematics of Thatcherism remain in place (1988f:274).

Hall points to the way in which Thatcherite discourse is alleged to have “operated directly on popular elements in the traditional philosophies and practical ideologies of the dominated classes (1988b:49). According to Hall: “These elements...often express a contradiction between popular interests and the power bloc. But since the terms in which this contradiction is expressed have no intrinsic, necessary or fixed class meaning, they can be effectively recomposed as elements within very different discourses, positioning the popular classes in relation to the power bloc in different ways. When, in a crisis, the traditional alignments are disputed, it is possible, on the very ground of this break, to construct the people into a populist political subject: with, not against, the power bloc; in alliance with new political forces in a crusade to ‘make Britain “Great” once more’” (1988b:49).

### 15.3 *Thatcherism as Hegemonic*

According to Hall, Thatcherism as a political strategy “wins the consent of very substantial sections of the subordinate and dominated classes”(1988e:165). In Hall’s view: “Thatcherism has *irrevocably* undermined the old solutions and positions”(1988d:155 *emphasis added*). According to Hall, “...the familiar Thatcherite litany...is *indelibly imprinted* on the public mind and imposed on public and private discourse everywhere”(1988f:274 *emphasis added*). We might question here whether in using the term ‘irrevocably’ Hall is actually being consistent with the

overall position he wishes to establish regarding the status of the realm of the discursive and ideological. The particular conception of language which Hall takes over from the writings of Laclau and Mouffe postulates an ever-present amenability or 'openness' to strategies of disarticulation/rearticulation. In this way, according to Laclau, Mouffe and Hall, key elements of political discourse and ideology are prime sites of contestation in the prosecution of hegemonic politics. Yet according to Hall's line of argument above concerning the allegedly 'irrevocable' status of Thatcherite discourse, it appears that the discourses and conceptual frameworks of the Left, social democracy, and Labourism are susceptible to strategies of ideological contestation and rearticulation, but not those of Thatcherism.

Exhibited here is an indication of a recurring theme throughout Hall's analysis. The latter exhibits a marked tendency to veer from statements asserting the merely contingent nature of Thatcherite hegemony (or as Hall prefers to put it at times 'dominance'), to statements of an essentially *a priori* nature which implicitly confirm the unassailable status of the latter. There is a theoretically inconsistent overestimation of both the long-term significance or 'shelf-life' of Thatcherism as a political and ideological strategy, and of its resistance to counter strategies.

Admittedly, at various points Hall insists that Thatcherism never actually succeeded in achieving hegemony (1988d:154-5). Rather, according to Hall: "Thatcherism remains dominant but not hegemonic"(1988d:155). Despite the fact that his whole argument is directed towards establishing the case that Thatcherism represented a revolutionary political force which 'broke the mould' in British politics by discursively and ideologically recasting what constitutes 'common sense' etc., Hall still wishes to insist that Thatcherism never actually achieved hegemony. Hall speaks of Thatcherism merely as a 'dominant' political and ideological force but without ever defining what this entails, or stating how this concept of 'dominance' differs from that of 'hegemony'. As Hall writes: "...I have never advanced the proposition that Thatcherism has achieved 'hegemony'. The idea to my mind is preposterous. What I have said is that, in contrast to the political strategy of both the Labourist and the fundamentalist left, Thatcherite politics are 'hegemonic' in their conception and project: the aim is to struggle on several fronts at once, not on the

economic-corporate one alone; and this is based on the knowledge that, in order really to dominate and restructure a social formation, political, moral and intellectual leadership must be coupled to economic dominance...They mean, if possible, to restructure the terrain of what is 'taken for granted' in social and political thought - and so to form a new common sense"(1988d:154).

Throughout Hall's analysis of Thatcherism then there is a fundamental strain of equivocation with regard to this key issue. What are we to make, for example, of Hall's already quoted assertion that "Thatcherite politics are 'hegemonic'" but hegemonic, according to Hall, "in their conception and project", in other words, not apparently in actuality but merely in intention? If this is the case, in other words, if Hall is merely informing us that Thatcherism as a political and ideological strategy endeavoured, but ultimately failed, to achieve hegemony, we are left with the question of just what it is which was allegedly so distinctively novel and revolutionary about Thatcherism as a political phenomenon. The derogatory and rhetorically constitutive references to the 'fundamentalist left' are a key part of Hall's attempt to establish beyond question the supposedly iconoclastic nature of the Thatcherite project. It is in fact a form of intellectual McCarthyism. We must either reject any attempt to understand Thatcherism in terms of an 'outmoded' class analysis which necessarily treats language and ideology in 'reductionist' terms, or be labelled 'fundamentalist'. No detailed argument is provided to illustrate the alleged inadequacies of such an approach. It is merely assumed *a priori* and regularly reinforced through the judicious application of slogans such as those above.

At various points throughout his account of Thatcherism, then, Hall is at pains to differentiate and distance his analysis from others, in particular those referred to as emanating from 'the Left'. Moreover, as Hall explicitly states: "the decision to focus on politics and ideology was the result of a deliberate strategy...in order to make a more general point about the need to develop a theoretical and political language on the left which rigorously avoids the temptations to economism, reductionism or teleological forms of argument" (1988a:3). There is evidence to suggest that what was previously referred to as Hall's *a priorism* is again operative here. This is underlined by the crucial role played in Hall's analysis by the straw man of 'the

Left', and the implicit equation of the latter and Marxism more generally with a crude form of Stalinism

#### 15.4 *The Unfalsifiability of Hall's Analysis of Thatcherism*

As Hall acknowledges: "That Thatcherism is in any serious sense 'popular' or has made any inroads into popular consciousness is, of course, an idea which is often resisted - paradoxically, as much by psephologists and poll analysts of a centrist persuasion as by critics of 'the new revisionism'. This question cannot be settled by simply 'looking at the facts': in the end it is a matter of political analysis and judgement"(1988a:6). Hall also insists: "This is why the question of Thatcherism and 'the popular', which cannot be immediately reread in terms of a simple class model or in terms of votes or public opinion polls, plays such an important part in my analysis"(1988a:6).

Clearly, we have to question Hall's position here. Firstly, why is it that we are not entitled to expect to find some tangible empirical evidence of Thatcherism's allegedly revolutionary impact on modern political consciousness? If his account of Thatcherism is not based merely on personal and unsubstantiated opinion then this sort of empirical evidence is surely a source which Hall has availed himself of. Otherwise, it is hard to see the grounds for Hall's already noted conclusion that: "...the familiar Thatcherite litany...is *indelibly imprinted* on the public mind and imposed on public and private discourse everywhere"(1988f:274 emphasis added). If the appeal to tangible empirical evidence is ruled out Hall has effectively rendered his analysis of Thatcherism unfalsifiable and critically immune. Again, with respect to Hall's assertion that the issue of whether Thatcherism has made significant inroads into popular consciousness is "in the end...a matter of political analysis and judgement", we might ask on what criteria Hall bases his judgement of Thatcherism.

As already noted above, Hall also insists that Thatcherism "cannot be immediately reread in terms of a simple class model or in terms of votes or public opinion polls"(1988a:6). Again we have to question whether Hall has rendered unfalsifiable and critically immune his analysis of Thatcherism. For if people are not measurably changing their political affiliations, opinions or voting behaviour then in what does

the allegedly revolutionary impact of Thatcherism consist? Hall's *a priori* rejection of any form of class analysis is matched by his rejection of any form of empirical verification to support his argument.

Although the question will not be pursued at any length, it is arguably at this point that the issue emerges of the role played by the media-generated image of Thatcherism as a supposedly revolutionary and iconoclastic political phenomenon and the possible impact which this has had on commentators.

#### 15.5 *Hall's Recognition of the Limitations to Thatcherism as a Political / Ideological Strategy*

As a further illustration of the strain of equivocation mentioned earlier, also important to note are the various limitations to the hegemonic project of Thatcherism which receive recognition either explicitly or implicitly in Hall's account and the way in which these are handled. Hall acknowledges, for example, that: "Ideologically... [Thatcherism] has certainly not totally won the hearts and minds of the majority of ordinary people"(1988a:6). However, it is equally significant from our point of view that Hall does not choose to pursue in any systematic fashion the question of just why this should be the case. Why should Thatcherism, which after all had access to the full ideological power of the state apparatus as well as the majority of the media behind it, have failed to successfully carry out its hegemonic project? Hall, in other words, has a recognition, but no adequate explanation, of this phenomenon. As already suggested, this is due to his reliance on a particular conception of language and its role in ideology, namely that inherited from the writings of Laclau and Mouffe and whose origins can be traced back to the Saussurean paradigm.

A Wittgensteinian perspective on language provides a possible answer to the question of why Thatcherism as a discursive hegemonic project should have failed. On this view the failure of the Thatcherite project to achieve hegemony stems from the fact that the language-game level of attempted ideological rearticulation was, from the point of view of the mass of ordinary people, simply not relevant to or sufficiently consonant with those other countervailing factors operative at the everyday, concrete level of a form of life. In other words, the attempted ideological and discursive rearticulations of Thatcherism were often fundamentally at odds with

the reinforcing experience of ordinary people's lives and practices. To this extent the potential efficacy of Thatcherism as a strategy of hegemonic politics was necessarily diluted or otherwise marginalised with respect to a whole range of key concepts, issues and propositions.

Interestingly, Hall himself quotes Gramsci who points to the fact that, "...new conceptions have an extremely unstable position among the popular masses"(1988e:169). However, the broader point underlying Gramsci's remark is one which Hall fails adequately to take on board with regard to his own reading and estimation of the alleged extent and long-term effects of Thatcherism. Rather, it remains Hall's contention that Thatcherism "is clearly not an 'external' force, operating on but having no roots in the internal 'logics' of their thinking and experience. Certain ways of thinking, feeling and calculating characteristic of Thatcherism have entered as a material and ideological force into the daily lives of ordinary people"(1988a:6). Hall's assertions are, however, contradicted by the only real form of evidence available, namely, that contained in opinion polls and attitude surveys of the period concerned.

It is not that such statements by Hall are entirely wrong. It is not, in other words, being asserted here that Thatcherism had no ideological impact whatsoever. The point is that Hall's analysis fails to adequately specify, either in terms of origin or content, the particular 'ways of thinking' concerned here. As a result, the nature of the mechanisms or processes involved is left vague. However, the overriding impression, given Hall's emphasis on Thatcherism as a hegemonic project, is that these modes of thought allegedly characteristic of Thatcherism have entered into the lives of ordinary people primarily as the result of a predominantly discursive ideological strategy. This, however, represents a fundamental downplaying of the context within which language is situated and thus also a devaluing of the concrete, extradiscursive political and economic actions of Thatcherism.



### 15.6 *Hall's Analysis of Thatcherism versus 'Reductionist' Accounts*

According to Hall: "...far from occupying a different world from that of Thatcherism, we can only renew the project of the left by precisely occupying the same world that Thatcherism does, and building from that a different sort of society"(1988a:15). Hall also issues the following warning to the Left with regard to Thatcherism: "Face to face with this dangerous new political formation, the temptation is always, ideologically to dismantle it, to force it to stand still by asking the classic Marxist question: who does it really represent?"(1988e:165). But why shouldn't the Left, in line with the logic of Hall's whole discussion of the political significance of ideological contestation, articulation, and conceptual hegemony, not seek to "dismantle" "this dangerous new political formation"? What, in other words, has happened to the political possibilities allegedly associated with the project of "disarticulation" which Hall makes so much of elsewhere? Is it that the economic conditions are not propitious for such an undertaking? If so, it begins to look suspiciously as if language and the hegemonic projects which depend on it are after all importantly constrained by extradiscursive factors. In which case, the difference which Hall would like to insist on between his and the Marxist conception of the role and scope of language and ideology becomes vanishingly thin. Only by including in the Marxist tradition the most resolutely reductionist formulations characteristic of Stalinist perversions of it does Hall's position on language, at least fifty-percent of the time, appear anything other than banal.

The fundamental equivocation on Hall's part is again indicative of a lapse into realist assumptions when faced with the issue of the allegedly revolutionary character of Thatcherism as a political and ideological phenomenon. What actually happens in Hall's account is that the contingent status of Thatcherism as a hegemonic project is implicitly withdrawn. Thus we find scattered throughout Hall's account references to the apparently extra-discursive 'reality' of the Thatcherite revolution; the 'reality' of the various allegedly fundamental changes in economic production; together with the 'reality' of the alleged decline of the concept of class etc. All of these are facts which we must simply accept, rather than discursive and ideological articulations. Once



again it is worth noting the asymmetrical nature of Hall's analysis here as evidenced by the reification of Thatcherite articulations, and the slide from an analysis of the latter which classifies them (in line with the underlying logic of his discursive approach) as contingently hegemonic, to an *a priori* account which implicitly attributes to such articulations an invincibility and critical immunity which threatens to contradict the very concept of 'hegemonic politics'. Hall argues, for example, that the Left needs, in ideological and political terms, to "play in the same ball park" as Thatcherism in order to be effective, i.e., not to attempt to redefine or conceptually reconstitute another type of "ball park"(1988f:276-277). Once again the question arises: why not? What is there in Hall's analysis which would rule this out on grounds of logical consistency?

The enunciation of this key prescriptive theme in Hall's writings, i.e., that we must accept the 'reality' of Thatcherism's hold on society, is also contradicted by his insistence elsewhere that "socialism itself has to speak to the people whom it wants to empower in words that belong to them as late twentieth century ordinary folks"(1988e:171 emphasis added). Again what is worth noting here is the implicit recognition by Hall of the need to appeal to those particular concepts and ideas which are already existent within and reinforced by the everyday experience and ordinary language of people. In other words, what is implicitly being conceded here is that the Left, in order to be politically and ideologically effective in its struggle against the dominance of Thatcherite discourse, needs to get beyond the latter rather than simply echoing it.

As E.M. Wood argues: "Since 'Thatcherism' is characterised by a perception of the world in terms of the class opposition between capital and labour, since the Thatcher government has had as its primary purpose to alter the balance of power between capital and labour which in their eyes has tilted in favour of labour, why should socialists respond by denying the centrality of class politics instead of confronting Thatcherism for what it is, theorizing it as such, and responding politically by taking the other side in the class war being waged by the Thatcherites? Why should socialists be more obsessed with the ideological trimmings of Thatcherism - its so-

called ‘authoritarian populism’ - than with its real practice in prosecuting the class war against labour?”(1986:9).

## Chapter 16

### Thatcherism: Towards A Wittgensteinian Account of Its Failure as a Hegemonic Project

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Thatcherism as a hegemonic project was a strategy aimed at restructuring fundamental political values through the rearticulation of key terms of social and political debate. The main aim of Thatcherism was to undermine the post war social democratic consensus and to replace this with the values of the market (Edgell and Duke, 1991:70). Edgell and Duke concur with the analysis of Jessop et al (1984,1985) and that of Gamble (*The Free Economy and the Free State*, 1988) “that there is little evidence of a new Thatcherite consensus. What Thatcherism has achieved is a shift in the terms of political debate...The national media have played a crucial role in facilitating the shift in political debate onto Thatcherite terrain”(1991:84).

#### 16.1 *Surveying the Evidence of the Impact of Thatcherism*

However, the question posed in the *British Social Attitudes* survey of 1983 on whether inflation should be the priority found that only 27% agreed. By contrast, 69% of respondents thought unemployment should be the number one government priority. In the *British Social Attitudes* survey of 1987 when the same question was posed the number who felt inflation should be the top priority had fallen to 23%, while those who felt unemployment should be given top priority had risen to 73% (Edgell and Duke, 1991:82). In other words, despite the sustained ideological campaign waged by Thatcherism to ‘disarticulate’ the widespread belief that government has a duty to provide employment, attitudes remained unchanged and in fact became more entrenched. As the 1987 *British Social Attitudes* survey shows, 57% of people still felt that government should provide jobs for those who want one (Edgell and Duke, 1991:80). Similarly, in the case of attitudes to privatisation, the

number expressing support had fallen from 49% in 1983, to 30% by 1987 (Edgell and Duke, 1991:150).

Viewing such figures in the light of a Wittgensteinian perspective on language suggests that the terms employed in the ideological and discursive strategies pursued by Thatcherism merely 'idled' from the point of view of the social agents at whom they were directed (see Wittgenstein, PI §132). What we need to avoid, in other words, is any simplistic equation of a change in the terms of debate used by the media or by political and social commentators with fundamental changes in the political consciousness of the electorate. The findings above support the view that the concrete everyday realities encountered by people on the receiving end of 'free market' reforms are more important factors than the particular form of ideological packaging in which such reforms are presented. The realities, pressures and practices of a working-class form of life represent crucial factors of resistance against hegemonic projects such as Thatcherism.

As Edgell and Duke point out, the social basis of support for Thatcherism was "narrowly capitalist class based and narrowing in terms of the vote at the 1979, 1983 and 1987 general elections. Opposition to Thatcherism over the same period was similarly social class based to the extent that, as one moved down the class structure, the greater the incidence of anti-Thatcher voting"(1991:217). Again what this indicates is the importance of form of life over purely language-game considerations, i.e., the importance of viewing language as a socially situated phenomenon which is necessarily bound up with and constrained by practices and actions.

The link between the reinforcing practices of a form of life and the resistance to hegemonic strategies is shown by the breakdown of the figures into social classes. In the case of unemployment, for example, 66% of workers felt this should be the top government priority, rather than inflation (Edgell and Duke, 1991:79). Such findings tend to contradict the reading of Thatcherism as a hegemonic or dominant force which succeeded in altering the consciousness of large sections of society. In particular, the relation shown up by the findings between opposition to Thatcherism and social class directly contradicts Hall's argument that Thatcherism's 'populist' strategy was a crucial element in winning over the masses. As we have seen, it is

Hall's view that: "The colonization of the popular press was a critical victory in this struggle to define the common sense of the times. Here was undertaken the critical ideological work of constructing around 'Thatcherism' a populist common sense"(1988b:48). Once again, however, Hall's assumptions regarding the influence of the popular press on the political affiliations and consciousness of ordinary people are open to criticism, unsupported as they are by any form of argumentation or statistical evidence. As the survey data indicates, despite the fact that the tabloid press were heavily pro-Thatcherite, the very class which made up the bulk of their readership remained resistant to Thatcherism as a hegemonic project.

Similar difficulties arise with respect to Hall's account of the role of "popular conceptions". According to Hall: "The popular defence of the NHS is genuine. But so is the demand for lower taxation"(1988f:274). However, Hall's analysis here fails to take into due consideration the role of media-hype in generating the allegedly "popular" demand for lower taxation. The evidence of opinion polls and *British Social Attitude* surveys consistently record a willingness on the part of a majority of the public to pay more tax in order to secure a better health service etc. (See Edgell and Duke, 1991:72-78).

Similarly, as Hirst points out: "The survey data presented in the Fifth Report of *British Social Attitudes 1988* show, for example, that there is no large-scale support for the extension of private education, that support for the principle of a universal Health Service is overwhelming, and that respondents are willing to see public expenditure rise to support public services. In 1987, for example, a mere 3 per cent supported the proposition that taxes should be reduced and less spent on health, education and social benefits, whilst 50 per cent favoured higher taxes and more expenditure. Moreover, the proportion of respondents favouring greater spending has grown in every year from 1983 to 1986"(1989:25).

Again, according to Hirst: "...public attitudes have obstinately refused to conform to the supposed success of the Thatcher revolution. Voters are unwilling to follow Mrs. Thatcher on issues like health, education and welfare, even if they are willing to choose the Conservatives as the government. The reason, of course, is that you choose only one government. If a voter feels that no other party is competent to

govern, then he or she has to choose all the policies of that party along with it”(1989:25).

What Hirst’s analysis points to is the existence and resilience of a set of hinge-propositions which remained in place despite the alleged ‘ideological hegemony’ or ‘dominance’ of Thatcherism. Examples of such propositions are reflected in the survey data, and include the commitment to a public health service, and to the principle of state provision of education, and so on. Again, examining the issue from a Wittgensteinian perspective on language helps us to see why this should have been the case. In particular, in contrast to the Saussurean paradigm of language as semiotic, it encourages us to rethink and re-evaluate many of the claims which have recently been made concerning the political significance of language or discourse.

Overall, the extent of support for key Thatcherite policies was far less than that suggested by Hall’s account. As Edgell and Duke point out: “In terms of general attitudes to cutting public spending and specific attitudes to spending on welfare state services...throughout the 1980s the majority of people disapproved of Conservative government policy”(1991:218). As they also note: “There is overwhelming evidence of a large consensus for maintained or increased spending on the main services such as health and education”(1991:72). Bosanquet makes a similar point, noting the fundamental strain of collectivism running through the attitudes which the British electorate have consistently taken towards the welfare state (1986:72).

Regardless of its pretensions to ideological hegemony Thatcherism in fact remained a minority viewpoint. As Edgell and Duke argue, the Conservative election victories were attained “despite, rather than because of Thatcherism”(1991:84). It was in fact the nature of the British electoral system itself which made possible the success of the Conservatives. As Edgell and Duke point out: “Thatcherism’s mandate has been essentially a parliamentary one, predicated upon Britain’s system of non-proportional representational voting”(1991:84). In addition, as the findings of various *British Social Attitudes* surveys clearly shows, opposition to and support for Thatcherism was closely related to social class (Edgell and Duke, 1991:217). As Edgell and Duke point out: “Thatcherism’s key sub-groups are employers, the petty bourgeoisie, totally private consumers and Conservative partisans”(1991:84).

As with the broad strategy of hegemony itself, we clearly have to question in more sceptical terms than Hall does, just how well this particular Thatcherite project of ideological disarticulation/rearticulation has fared. For despite the best hegemonic efforts of Thatcherite discourse a whole number of key assumptions or elements of what might be termed the popular political conscience have nevertheless tended stubbornly to remain in place. Other key examples of these include the perception, regularly documented in *British Social Attitude* surveys, of Britain as a class society, etc. From a Wittgensteinian perspective on language as a socially-embedded phenomenon we can gain an understanding of this state of affairs. In particular, we can, as already suggested, profitably enlist the key Wittgensteinian concept of ‘hinge propositions’ to account for the failure of Thatcherism as a hegemonic project.

#### 16.2 *Analyses of Thatcherism:*

##### *Form of Life versus Language Game*

From a Wittgensteinian perspective on language the *British Social Attitude* survey findings are predictable. What such findings illustrate is that form of life considerations are the key factor, i.e., that the understanding of language and concepts in general, and thus the key ‘floating signifiers’ referred to by Laclau, Mouffe and Hall, are inextricably related to, and reinforced by, everyday social practices and institutions. Thus, in the case of the key sub-groups referred to by Edgell and Duke, Thatcherite discourse was, not surprisingly, consonant with the actual experience and practices of these groups. The anti-statist discourse of self-sufficiency and reliance actually meshed with the form of life of such people; hence, not surprisingly, it was among such groups that support for Thatcherite ideology was at its highest. As Edgell and Duke point out: “...the greater the involvement of a household in private consumption, the more likely it was to vote for Thatcherism, and vice versa”(1991:217).

The concrete practices and experiences at the level of a form of life pose substantial obstacles to the ‘craving for generality’ which necessarily underlies hegemonic projects such as Thatcherism. The discourse in praise of ‘market values’ and a ‘natural’ level of unemployment etc., simply foundered because it was, from the point of view of the majority who were exposed to the actual effects of such



policies, clearly irrelevant and contradicted by their everyday experience. The role of practices emphasised in Wittgenstein's account of the irreducibly social nature of language is thus a key aspect in understanding the failure of Thatcherism as a hegemonic project. The hegemonic pretensions of the Thatcherite project as manifested at the level of discourse were, in Wittgensteinian terms, insufficient to dislodge a number of key 'hinge propositions' held in place, not solely by language, but by the concrete routines and practices of large sections of the community.

Hall's analysis is thus one which tends to operate on a predominantly 'language-game' level of analysis with little or no reference to what has been termed 'form of life' level considerations. In particular, in analysing the alleged impact of Thatcherite discourse there is a failure to adequately acknowledge any distinction in terms of amenability to ideological disarticulation/rearticulation between what Wittgenstein termed 'hinge propositions' and others. As Wittgenstein pointed out: "It is not every sentence-like formation that we know how to do something with, not every technique has an application in our life"(PI §520). In this sense, as suggested above, Thatcherism as a hegemonic project frequently, and with respect to a number of crucial issues, 'idled' in terms of the interpellatory relevance of its discourse (See PI §132). The attempted interpellation of political actors via language and concepts failed because it had little or no application in the life of such actors. It resembled, in Wittgenstein words, "a wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it, is not part of the mechanism"(PI §271). Cashing out Wittgenstein's metaphor in concrete terms, the 'wheel' in question here corresponds to the attempted Thatcherite disarticulation/rearticulation of concepts such as 'freedom' etc., while the 'mechanism' corresponds to the realities of the 'free' market experienced from the point of view of those 'released' from employment and so on.

As we have seen, it is Hall's view that "since the terms in which this contradiction between popular interests and the power bloc is expressed have no intrinsic, necessary or fixed class meaning, they can be effectively recomposed as elements within very different discourses, positioning the popular classes in relation to the power bloc in different ways"(1988b:49). Hall's anagrammatical conception of politics, political consciousness and ideology comes through clearly in passages such

as the foregoing. Such passages also highlight the constitutive dimension of Hall's own particular form of discourse, i.e., the consistent deployment throughout Hall's account of a predominantly linguistic idiom relying on such key terms as 'narration', 'articulation' etc.

In fact, crucial to Hall's conception of politics as rearticulation is the distinctly Saussurean/poststructuralist conception of language; something which is captured in Hall's reference to "the sliding of the word across a range of different, sometimes incompatible, meanings and discursive contexts"(1988a:4). We have already encountered this particular conception of language and its political implications in section I with reference to the writings of Rorty and Lyotard. The chief problem located previously is also relevant in the context of Hall's analysis of Thatcherism, namely, a failure to draw the appropriate theoretical and political conclusions from language conceived as a truly socially-embedded phenomenon.

As already argued, the existence of hinge propositions indicates the socially and politically embedded nature of language. A number of important implications stem from the absence of any such analogues in interpretations of Thatcherism as a hegemonic project. Chief among these is the typically postmodern overestimation of the transformative significance of language which forms a key component of linguistic idealism. This idealism stems from an underestimation of the network of concrete social practices which sustain certain hinge propositions in position and thus confer a important degree of immunity against hegemonic projects of disarticulation /rearticulation. As Fairclough acknowledges: "Clearly some elements [of discourse] are more ideologically fixed than others..."(1995:81).

It is important to note, however, that these are fixed by the role which language plays within a context of concrete social practices. The fact that hinge propositions are affected by changes in social life is an important part of what legitimates an extension of the relevance of the concept from the ostensibly narrow philosophical context of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* to the sphere of the socio-political. As already noted, Wittgenstein himself is engaged in the critical activity of denying the strict demarcation of any purely logical sphere separated from the contingent social practices and institutions of human beings. The key point is that a recognition of the

relationship between hinge propositions and social practices necessarily sets limits to the type and degree of change that can plausibly be attributed to the role of language or ideology.

In addition, insufficient recognition is given to the fact that ordinary language contains hinge propositions in the form of collectivist/anti-Thatcherite discursive traditions which cannot simply be 'deconstructed' or 'rearticulated'. For these are linked to concrete collectivist practices and institutions such as the NHS and state education. The language and concepts which embody the widespread commitment to such institutions are sustained and reinforced by the myriad experiences of those whose lives are bound up with them.

Working from a Wittgensteinian perspective on language it can be argued that Thatcherism as a hegemonic project was in fact most successful during those phases when actions and practices at both language-game and form of life levels were combined and only when these in turn did not conflict seriously with certain deeply ingrained hinge propositions. In other words, Thatcherism as a hegemonic project was successful when moving, not merely on the language-game level as many linguistic idealist accounts of the phenomenon suggest, but when this was combined with actions at the level of concrete practices, i.e. at the level of a form of life. The socio-political significance of hegemonic struggle at the purely linguistic /conceptual level is limited, and claims made on its behalf require to be more adequately contextualised. This itself is a deeply Wittgensteinian point which applies to the claims made by poststructuralists and postmodernists concerning the importance of the linguistic and symbolic in contemporary society. It illustrates the dangers of generalisation from a few limited instances.

## **Conclusion**

It is not the contention of this study that contemporary political theory should refuse to recognise or take on board the important lessons and insights which can be gleaned from a focus on the linguistic turn. On the contrary, the emphasis on the constitutive, as opposed to the merely instrumental or representationalist conception of language, and the political implications which flow from this represent a valuable and much-

needed corrective to the traditional positivist and behaviourist theoretical standpoints. In other words, there can be no denial that language, both in terms of its internal structure and in terms of its socially constrained conditions of usage, is a politically significant phenomenon worthy of sustained critical attention.

Rather, the charge to be levelled is fundamentally one of inconsistency on the part of some major representatives of the poststructuralist and postmodernist 'movements'. In particular, this consists in a failure to adequately recognize the full social and political implications of a conception of language which radically deconstructs and problematises meaning and reference. The inconsistency is most clearly evident in the systematic privileging of the allegedly positive political implications flowing from the postmodern critique of traditional conceptions of language. This, however, contradicts one of the centrally declared aims of postmodernism, namely, that one should actively seek to deconstruct the hierarchical privileging of one particular term within binary oppositions such as 'true/false', 'philosophical/rhetorical', 'right/wrong', etc.

On the positive side, the perspectives of poststructuralism and postmodernism have rightly pointed to the problematic nature of concepts such as meaning and reference. However, it is also ironic that their writings often evince the view that their own assertions regarding the existence and nature of the 'postmodern' itself share an altogether more philosophically secure status. All too often the view seems to be that postmodernism is here and that consequently no further argument is required.<sup>19</sup> They thus implicitly underline their own allegiance to an epistemically privileged and ostensibly thoroughly discredited philosophical vantage-point. In this way the body of writing which heralds the arrival of 'postmodernity' (one clearly hesitates to use the term 'thesis' here) seems somehow curiously exempt from the cognitively destabilising implications stemming from the allegedly rhetorical and linguistically constituted nature of all theoretical constructions. And yet, of course, this is a feature which postmodernists at other times are only too eager to point to.

A central contention of the present study is that a more intensive investigation and assessment of the likely political consequences of the postmodern critique of language is essential. The allegedly liberating potential of the linguistic turn in

contemporary thought has been emphasised to such an extent that it has tended to bracket as 'reactionary' any attempt, such as that of Habermas, to defend a rationalist and universalistic conception of language. The potent allure of 'pluralism' and 'diversity' in the socio-political realm has encouraged an uncritical acceptance of a conception of language whose philosophical basis is arguably unable to ground even the most basic and minimal forms of human rights. While a Wittgensteinian perspective does not provide all of the answers, it nevertheless represents the kind of starting point from which to appraise the impact of what until now has been the dominant reading of the linguistic turn, namely that inspired by the writings of Saussure. As argued, this impact is not confined to political theory, but influences both the accounts offered of key contemporary developments, and the conclusions which are drawn in terms of future political practice.

## NOTES

1. As Culler also points out: "Saussure's editors organized the course so that it began with the distinction between *langue* and *parole*. Saussure was thus portrayed as saying that language is a confused mass of heterogeneous facts and the only way to make sense of it is to postulate the existence of something called the linguistic system and to set aside everything else. The distinction has thus seemed extremely arbitrary to many people: a postulate which had to be accepted on faith if one were to proceed"(1976:34).

2. As Merquior points out (1986:12) use of the term 'arbitrary' as applied to language was a commonplace which preceded Saussure. Merquior, citing the detailed studies of Eugenio Coseriu (1977) notes its roots in classical antiquity in the writings of Plato (*Cratylus*) and Aristotle (*De Interpretatione*); and running as a theme through the writings of Hobbes (1655), Locke (1690), Leibniz (1703), Wolff (1719), Berkeley (1733), Bretinger (1740), Condillac (1746), Turgot (1751), Lessing (1766), D.Stewart (1792), Fichte (1795) and Hegel (1817). Such a recognition tends to problematise the notion of a purely Saussurean linguistic legacy transmitted via generative metaphor.

3. See e.g., Palmer, (1990:8-9), Strozier, (1988:123), and Winston, (1974:41), who all point out the importance of understanding and contextualizing Saussurean linguistics as an overreaction to a century of historicism in linguistics. In particular, Winston has illustrated the connection between the dominant paradigm in nineteenth-century natural science, Darwinism, and its effect upon the study of linguistics. This provides us with another valuable insight into the way in which an implicit politics can often stem from the role of particular models in linguistic theory-formation. In this case the diachronic study of language, while obviously not a new methodological approach, was nevertheless clearly influenced by, and modelled on, the Darwinian concept of evolution. As Winston notes: "Affected by the whole Darwinian *Umwelt*, nineteenth-century linguists studied the ways in which French and Italian grew from Latin, or how Sanskrit related to Greek and so on. This, of course, created the notions of developed and primitive [languages]"(1974:41).

4. As Jameson points out: "It is Levi-Strauss who...reformulates this process in terms of a theory about the primacy of the signifier itself with respect to the signified. It is at this point that we can watch what was initially a method (the isolation of the signifier for purposes of structural analysis) slowly turn about into what amounts to a metaphysical presupposition as to the priority of the signifier itself..."(1974:130-131).

5. Due to lack of space and in order to avoid becoming bogged down with technical details I have deliberately avoided in this section a detailed discussion of the psychological process involved in generative metaphor. However, Sternberg et al



(1979) have furnished a wealth of experimental and empirical data to back up the claims made by Schon and others concerning the importance of the phenomenon.

6. We should also note Harris's recognition of some of the differences between Wittgenstein and Saussure with respect to the notion of language as a socially-embedded phenomenon (See Harris, 1987:113).

7. In addition, as Callinicos points out, in the writings of Quine, Davidson, Kripke, Putnam and others, "Contemporary analytical philosophy of language contains theories of meaning as vigorously anti-atomistic as anything in the Saussurean tradition...What is striking about these discussions is their refusal to base their accounts of reference on any notion of the subject with direct access even to the contents of its own consciousness...There is, of course, little agreement about the epistemological drift of recent work in analytical philosophy of language, as the debates between 'realists' and 'anti-realists' should make clear...Nevertheless, what th[is] work...shows is that the rejection of atomism does not, on the face of it, require the abandonment of the concept of reference: indeed, Davidson's theory of meaning *combines* holism and realism. There is more than one way out of the myth of the given"(1989b:79-80).

8. As Conley has shown in an interesting and illuminating discussion, there has occurred what he terms a "turn to rhetoric" on the part of contemporary philosophers such as Richard McKeon, Stephen Toulmin, Chaim Perelman, and Jurgen Habermas (1990:285-307).

9. As Habermas argues, Foucault's analysis "replaced the model of repression and emancipation developed by Marx and Freud with a pluralism of power/discourse formations. These formations intersect and succeed one another and can be differentiated according to their style and intensity. They cannot, however, be judged in terms of validity, which was possible in the case of the repression and emancipation of conscious as opposed to unconscious conflict resolutions" (Habermas, "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment*", quoted in Rorty, 1991:173).

10. In what might be regarded as an authentic extrapolation of at least one aspect of the underlying political significance of Wittgenstein's line of thought, Jameson, for example, refers "not [to] the disappearance of the great master-narratives, but their passage underground as it were, their continuing but now unconscious effectivity as a way of 'thinking about' and acting in our current situation"(Intro to Lyotard, 1984:xii).

11. On the methodological necessity of abstraction in linguistics and some of its consequences in the case of Chomskyan linguistics see Salkie, (1990:42-44; 52-95). This point has also been recognised in the case of Saussurean linguistics by, among others, Merquior, (1986:10-11). The point is an important one and clearly related to our discussion of the role of generative metaphor. It illustrates, firstly, the non-



subjective, non-intentional, nature of the transmission process involved in the latter and thereby renders problematic any imputation of ideological or deliberately obfuscatory intent on the part of particular theorists who formulate models or metaphors for the purposes of explication or theory building.

Secondly, as Merquior points out, particular subject matters such as linguistics encourage, by their nature, a greater degree of abstraction. The point is not merely academic. As Schon argues, a crucial first step in the solving of problems, both theoretical and practical, in various realms is a recognition of the possibility that they are actually frame conflicts generated by different and conflicting metaphors (1979:256). Sternberg et al point to the Cuban missile crisis as a prime example of this crucial relation between problem-setting and problem-solving (1979:344).

12. As Consigny notes, (see 1974:175ff) some commentators such as Bitzer assign explanatory primacy to the rhetorical situation as a determining factor seriously constricting the options of the rhetor. The opposite view is taken by Vatz, who postulates the completely “non-determinate” nature of the situation and consequently implies a potentially infinite power on the part of the rhetor (see Consigny, 1974:175-6). Both views, however, appear to represent extreme positions. Hence we might plausibly assume (in line with the Aristotelian notion of the ‘mean’) that the truth lies somewhere in the middle. Consigny himself argues that Aristotle’s *topics* can function as the crucial mediating factor overcoming the dichotomy (1974:181-185).

13. For a more general critique of anti-rationalist conservatism see the points raised by Barry (1965:56-58).

14. As Williams points out with regard to the key notion of a ‘tradition’: “when we realize that there are traditions (real plural, as distinct from the ‘plural singular’ present also in values and standards), and that only some of them or parts of them have been selected for our respect and duty, we can see how difficult Tradition really is, in an abstract or exhortatory or, as so often, ratifying use”(1988:319).

15. For an early though arguably still relevant analysis of the political consequences of linguistic essentialism see Weldon, (1960:17ff). (For an arguably misguided critique of the latter see also Winch, (1990:12-15)). Dragona-Monachou (1989) has also pointed to the writings of Wittgenstein and their potential for freeing social and political philosophy from what he terms the “representational illusion”, something which, he argues, has frequently bedevilled discussion of the nature of the link between language and “reality”(1989:322).

In a similar vein, Rossi-Landi is another commentator who has detected the important link between a Wittgensteinian perspective and the political significance of a potential demystification resulting from a focus on, and contrast between, institutional and ordinary forms of language (Rossi-Landi, 1979:338). Rossi-Landi also argues for a recognition of the notion of what he terms “linguistic alienation” in the writings of Wittgenstein (1979:339-342). (On the same topic cf. Easton, 1983:140f).

In addition, there are some interesting affinities between the kind of Wittgensteinian approach which has been argued for in the present paper and the approach to language and its consequences in the social and political sphere associated with the once influential school of 'General Semantics' founded by Alfred Korzybski. In this regard Schaff (1962:90-107) has outlined in detail some of the central failings of Korzybski's social 'pathology' of language. Equally important, Schaff's critique of the latter indicates those insights which are perhaps worth saving and developing through a comparative analysis of their treatment in the writings of Wittgenstein.

16. The equivocal nature of Gellner's critique of a Wittgensteinian approach is a point which has been noted by Wertheimer who notes that: "In pointing to what linguistic analysis 'in fact' seems to do, Gellner appears to be making a sociological critique. But Gellner also argues...that conservatism is inevitable"(1976:407).

17. The diachronic dimension of language which, as I have attempted to argue, is necessarily associated with the concept of an ordinary language perspective properly conceived (hence the existence of certain parallels between the perspectives of Wittgenstein and Saussure) are points noted also by Giddens (1979:33-48), and by Harris (1993), although neither attempt to develop what I take to be the specific implications of this for discussions of the alleged conservatism of a Wittgensteinian approach. Nevertheless, as Giddens rightly points out in comparing Wittgenstein and Derrida: "Differance is not an alien conception to Wittgensteinian philosophy: it could be said that for Wittgenstein meaning is created and sustained by the play of difference in use...[Thus] Wittgenstein's interpretation of language is not, as many commentators tend to present it, an a-temporal one; on the contrary, time is integral to it"(1979:34).

18. However, there is also an indication of some of the political implications of Wittgenstein's saying/showing distinction to be gleaned from Flathman's discussion of the anti private-language argument (1973:37). In particular, there is an implicit recognition in Flathman's account of the linguistic egalitarianism arguably entailed by Wittgenstein's analysis and which stems from the focus of the latter on the social basis of meaning production. (On the same point see *ibid*:10).

19. Equally, one might wish to question, as various critics have done, the evidential basis for the whole notion of a qualitatively distinctive 'postmodern' era as opposed to a conceptualisation of the present period as 'late modernity' (see e.g. Jameson, 1984; Turner, 1991b; and Smart, 1991). In so doing one might bring in Marx and Engels' strikingly 'postmodern' description of modernity as found in the *Communist Manifesto*.

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